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WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY WEEKLY. EVERY WEEK.

IN THE 'FRISCO EARTHQUAKE; OR, BOB BRAG'S DAY OF TERROR.

By PROF OLIVER OWENS.



Boom! The earth shook shudderingly. Crash! Doomed 'Frisco was in the throes of the earthquake. Buildings toppled down like houses of cards! "Save me!" screamed Lena, then fainted. "If there's safety anywhere!" panted Bob rushing out with mother and child.

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IN THE 'FRISCO EARTHQUAKE;

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CHAPTER I.

THE BOTTOM DROPS OUT OF THE EARTH.

As he awoke, reached out and got his watch, Bob Bragg became aware of three things.

He was abed in an old-fashioned house on Hayes street, San Francisco.

It was the eighteenth of April, 1906.

It was just ten minutes past five in the morning.

"Just my kind of luck!" muttered Bob. "I'm plumb wide awake, and there's no sense in getting up for an hour and a half yet."

Yet, as he lay there in bed, kicking restlessly about, his mind traveled back over all that had conspired to bring him to 'Frisco.

"I've been here two weeks, and haven't done a blessed thing but spend money and time!" he grunted, in a disheartened way. "There don't seem to be any end to this trail. In another week—a fortnight at the most—I must go back East, whipped out; and break mother's heart!"

Judging by the sigh that came from his lips, Bob's own heart might have been breaking.

And, as a matter of fact, if he failed on this one great item of business that had brought him to the city of the Golden Gate, his heart would be as near to breaking as a boy's heart could come.

His was a queer enough puzzle to untangle.

Years ago his father had married his mother. Thereby

Richard Bragg had deeply offended his own father, an irritable old man.

Bob's grandfather had been a wealthy man, but this old man cut off his son after the wedding that took place in San Francisco.

Richard Bragg, full of grit, had tried his best to provide for his young wife and the son who had come to them.

But Richard's health had not been good for years.

In the year 1905 Bob's father had died, still unforgiven by his own father.

Thereupon, Bob and his mother had scratched along rather hard, though they had a small balance in a savings bank to fall back upon in case of absolute need.

In January of the new year Bob's grandfather had died.

He left an estate of more than a quarter of a million to his son, Richard, or to Richard's "heirs, if any."

In the first moment that the news came to them, Bob and his mother had felt justly elated at the coming of a belated fortune.

But then the law stepped in, with its grave, searching questions.

Richard Bragg being dead, it was necessary for Bob's mother to prove that she was the lawful wife of Richard Bragg, deceased.

Could she prove it?

At first thought nothing seemed easier.

The marriage had been duly recorded by the County Clerk at San Francisco.

It would be on record at the City Hall in that city.

So the lawyer to whom Bob's mother went wrote to the County Clerk in 'Frisco for a copy of the marriage entry.

After a long delay the reply came.

Some years before, owing to a series of frauds in the City Hall, many pages had been bodily torn out of the record books.

It so happened that the record of the marriage of Bob's parents was among those that had been stolen.

The law is a strange thing. Everyone in that little Eastern town had known, or at least been reasonably sure, that Bob's parents were properly married.

But there was no official record to show this.

The marriage certificate, given by the clergyman?

Thereby hung another tale as strange.

Immediately after their marriage Bob's father and mother had gone to live with a private family in a house on Hayes street.

Just where this house was situated, Bob's mother was not now sure. She remembered only that it was not far from Market street.

While sleeping in this house one night Mrs. Bragg had had a "bad" dream, in which the loss of her marriage certificate played an important part.

So frightened was she by the dream that, upon awaking, she flew to the trunk in which the marriage certificate lay.

There she found it safe, but the influence of the dream was still upon her.

Her husband having already risen and gone out, Mrs. Bragg was left to her own devices.

Looking about the room she discovered that one of the mop-boards was so loose as to be almost out of its place.

This short length of mop-board she pried away, finding a considerable recess behind it.

It would serve as a perfect hiding place that no one would think of looking for.

Full of the thought, in the terror still left by the remembrance of her terrible dream, the young bride flew down the stairs to her landlady, from whom she procured a hammer and a few nails.

Returning upstairs, young Mrs. Bragg had placed her marriage certificate in a small tin box that she happened to have.

Even at this late day in 1906 Bob's mother remembered that the box was three inches by four at the end, and ten inches in length.

This box, containing the certificate, she had hurriedly placed behind the loose mop-board, and then had nailed that bit of timber securely in place.

"I remember," she explained to her son, "as plainly as if it were yesterday, that I drove four nails in at one end of the mop-board, and three nails at the other end. Then I felt safe. No one would suspect where my marriage certificate was hidden. I would keep it there until I moved. I was happy, contented, once more, and so I rather forgot about it all."

Then came sudden circumstances in which the newly-married couple started hastily for the East.

Not until they were on the train, and two hundred miles away from the Golden Gate, did Mrs. Bragg remember the left-behind marriage certificate. In alarm she told her husband.

"Pooh! That isn't worth going back after," laughed Richard Bragg. "The whole thing is on record at the City Hall, and we can get a copy if we should ever want one."

So it had been forgotten until the need came.

But now here was Mrs. Bragg, unable to prove her marriage, and, without that proof, unable to touch a penny of the fortune that rightfully belonged to her.

In the case that she failed to prove her marriage, the money would go to a distant cousin of Bob's father.

It had all seemed a simple task to Bob to come to 'Frisco, and to find that house if it were still standing, and to find the mop-board in question, if it had not since been tampered with.

So our hero had come alone, his mother being almost helplessly ill from the disappointment, and from the secret dread that many of her friends believed she never had been really married to Bob's father.

"And so I've put in two weeks already, on what seemed such a simple job," sighed Bob, as he lay in bed at 5.10 on that morning. "In two weeks more I'll be cleaned out of money, except for my return fare. And mother'll certainly die of grief and shame if I don't find that blessed paper! Whew! To think of losing three hundred thousand dollars for the lack of one measly page of writing!"

Yet our hero's search had been as thorough as it was possible.

For twelve blocks up from the lower end of Hayes Street he had carefully searched every house that the buildings records showed to have been standing at the time of his mother's wedding.

"Well, I've got to begin with Block 13 to-day," he cried, desperately. "I'll carry the search to the end of Hayes Street, if there's time left me!"

As he kicked restlessly out of bed against the wall, the toes of one foot touched the mop-board.

Right there he started as if he had received an electric shock.

Then, dizzy, he leaned over the edge of the bed, yanking the hampering clothes away.

"Three nails at one end—four at the other! Glory!" he ejaculated in a frenzy of joy.

With a whoop he was out of bed, hauling the bed out away from the mop-board.

"What a prize idiot I've been!" he choked. "I've been in this house from the first, and I gave hardly a look at this one room of all the rooms in the world. I never saw that board before, just because the bed rested against the wall there! Bob Bragg, you unspeakable, unutterable ass!"

In a frenzy of mixed reproach and uncontrollable joy, he dashed at his trousers, securing his large jack-knife.

With trembling fibers he started to pry away the board. He had gotten one end almost off when—

Snap! The blade had broken off short.

Nothing daunted, he lay hold of the loosened end of the board to wrench it off.

A sudden fit of swaying dizziness seized him. His heart was surging behind his ribs.

He felt as if he were either going to die with joy, or else go crazy.

"I've got to steady myself and get a grip on my brain," he muttered, rising and holding to the foot of the bed. "I mustn't go off the handle, now that I've got all the joy I've been hunting for. Oh, bother! I'll dress, and cool down while I'm doing it. Then I'll go downstairs and get proper tools for this kind of a job. How glad Mrs. Rivers will be—the dear soul. She's been so anxious for me! And I shall always love 'Frisco people for their goodness in letting me explore their houses when I told them that I was after a precious family record. Oh, they've all been good to me out here. And I'm so happy. But Mrs. Rivers! She's the prize of all the folks I've met out here. Lena Rivers, God bless her! If she were a younger woman I'd fall in love with her and marry her in spite of everything!"

Then Bob smiled as he thought of himself, a beardless boy of seventeen, thinking of marriage with this tall, stately, handsome young widow ten years older than himself and with a daughter nearly half as old as the impulsive Eastern boy.

"But she's a brick, anyway, dear old Lena is," flushed Bob, as he went feverishly on with his dressing. "Now that we're going to have the Bragg money after all, I'll make mother do something handsome by dear old Lena."

Mrs. Rivers had four rooms on the second floor of this Hayes Street house. One of them was the bed-room she had rented to our hero to help out on the small income that she earned from dressmaking.

"Oh, you dear old mop-board!" glowed Bob, as he turned once more to look at the loosened timber. "What you mean to me! Words can't tell! And mother! I'll wire her the very second that I'm sure!"

Having finished one of the hastiest dressings he had ever done, he picked up his watch from the stand beside the bed.

"Five-thirteen?" he murmured, slipping the time-piece into his pocket. "I've dressed in record time. But things are happening fast this great morning!"

Suddenly, though he was not aware of feeling badly, he staggered, reeled, pitched up against the wall, then plunged on his face on the floor.

In a twinkling he sat up, half-dazed with the queerness of it all.

"What on earth—? Why, I'm not sick!"

The floor under him seemed tossing like the sea.

His frightened gaze saw the walls bulge inward, then sag outward.

There was a rumbling, an indescribable din, as if the whole universe were grumbling in its wrath.

Bob shot his hands behind him to save himself from being pitched on his back.

"I know what's up!" he screamed, frantically. "I've gone crazy!"

A woman's horrified shriek rang out in another room. A child's piercing cry blended with it.

"Have they gone crazy, too?" chattered Bob, then broke into hysterical laughter.

"Oh, Bob, Bob! Are you there, alive?"

It was Lena Rivers' agonized voice.

"Alive, yes," Bob bellowed back, hoarsely. "But I believe I'm going crazy! What ails me?"

"Oh, Bob, this is the most dreadful earthquake—"

"Earthquake?" roared Bob. "Bosh! Is that all?"

He crawled swiftly to the door, then rose, clutching at the frame for support.

Crash! Down came the ceiling behind him, beams and all, with a terrific cloud of dust.

Somehow, the boy got that door open.

In the doorway of her room, not having time to take more than the first steps at dressing, stood Lena Rivers, looking the picture of beautiful terror.

To her skirts clung little Elsie, her childish face white and haggard with the horror of it all.

For the house still swayed and rocked, as if nothing could hold it up another instant.

From all over the neighborhood came shrieks of terror and agony.

It was Bedlam turned loose—the bottom dropping out of the once solid earth!

"Bob," faltered Mrs. Rivers, as she tried to steady herself and hold up the child at the same time, "this is Judgment Day—the end of everything!"

"Come toward me, Lena! Try to reach me!" implored gallant Bob, as trying desperately to keep his footing on that topsy-turvy, tremulous floor, he sought to reach mother and child. "Don't cry, Elsie—it'll be all right!"

Topple! A sudden swaying of floor and walls hurled Mrs. Rivers forward into his arms.

Boom! The earth shook shudderingly.

Crash! Doomed 'Frisco was in the throes of the earthquake!

Buildings now toppled over like houses of cards!

"Save me, Bob!" screamed Lena. "And—oh, save Elsie!"

Then she fainted.

"If there's any safety anywhere!" panted Bob.

Still holding Mrs. Rivers tight in his arms, he called huskily:

"Grab my clothes, Elsie, dear! Hold on tight! Get to the stairs with me!"

Somehow, even hampered by the weight of this tall,

solidly built, beautiful young woman, Bob reached the stairs, sitting on the top stair.

Elsie was still clinging to him.

"Now, get both your arms around my neck, little one," quavered young Bragg. "Now, hold on tight—for your life, pet! Can you!"

"Yes, I can!" Elsie screamed, bravely.

"Good! Now we're going!"

Rising, staggering under his double burden, Bob Bragg succeeded in getting downstairs to the door and in rushing out with mother and child.

They were in the street—but homeless!

In the street! Just three human dots in that mad, panic-frenzied throng of lost souls in doomed Hayes Valley!

CHAPTER II.

SCAR-FACE A HALF MINUTE TO THE GOOD.

While the shock lasted, people knew not what they did, nor what happened.

It slackened, then stopped, at the end of three minutes.

Three minutes? Three centuries of terror and agony!

Bob reached the middle of the street and lay Mrs. Rivers down on the pavement.

Elsie slid down to her mother's side, and lay there, bewilderedly hugging her parent.

As for Bob, though he tried to stand up and know what was going on around him, he realized far less than he saw.

All up and down the street, as far as the eye could reach, it was the same wild, indescribable picture of people fighting their way frantically through the doorways to the street.

One man Bob saw come safely out of his door, and landed up against a lamp-post. In another instant a sign had fallen upon the unfortunate wretch, crushing his head in.

Another man was pitched headlong from an upper window to the pavement, the fall killing him.

People were on their knees, praying. Others lay on their faces, afraid, or unable, to raise themselves.

On the sidewalk, not ten feet from the Eastern boy, lay a man who was swiftly gasping his life out. A victim of heart disease, the shock had done for this man.

Then the shock lightened, next stopped.

Bob's first thought was now of the fainting woman under his protection.

She still lay in that complete stupor.

At the curb stood a bucket that had been put there for watering a horse.

However it happened, the bucket still retained nearly half its liquid contents.

Snatching it up, Bob bent over his friend, took careful aim, and dashed the water well over her face, so that much of it trickled down inside her robe.

There was a flutter of the eyelids, and Bob knelt eagerly beside her.

"Wake up! Look at us and talk to us, Lena. Here! Rouse! Your child needs you!"

"Oh, mamma, you ain't dead?" Elsie screamed in a new panic of terror greater than that caused by the earthquake.

The piteous childish voice roused the woman. She opened her eyes, smiling faintly.

"Come, it's all over, Lena," the boy assured her. "But rouse! We have got to get out of this to clear space somehow. These toppling buildings will be down on us at the next shake. Come, you can sit up. I'll help you!"

In a little while Bob Bragg had the woman on her feet again. She was weak and swayed, but Bob's strong young arm around her held her up.

All of the crowd that had regained its senses enough to think was heading in the same direction—toward Market Street.

The one instinct was to reach that great artery of the city and to follow it out to the city limits, there to reach the fields or the hills where there were no swaying buildings to topple down and crush out life.

"Can't we get back into the house—for a few minutes?" asked Mrs. Rivers.

"It's not to be thought of," panted Bob. "Look at your old home now! The weight of a foot on the stairs would bring the whole structure down in a heap of dust! Come!"

With one arm tightly around her, and the other hand gripping Elsie's little hand, Bob led them down through the middle of the street.

Nor, until they had turned into Market Street, and were heading up toward the city limits, did Bob again think of that precious box all but recovered.

"Oh—great heavens!" he choked, stopping short in despair.

"What is it?" Lena asked, faintly, shuddering and leaning more heavily upon him.

She looked as if she were about to faint again. Kind-hearted Bob feared that she might even die if she were left alone now.

No; he could not go back—not yet, anyway.

"If that box was there, it will be there in the ruins when I get back," he assured himself.

"What is it?" Lena repeated, curiously.

"I was thinking of something else, for a moment," Bob evaded. "But no, we've got to go forward to safety—if there's any left anywhere in the world!"

"Do you think this shock has taken in the whole country—or the whole world?" the young woman asked, her white lips barely framing the question.

"The Lord only knows," Bob answered, blindly.

Crash! R-r-rip! Boom!

Though the shock had ceased, the trembling of the earth had left thousands of structures in the city in such top-heavy condition that hardly a breeze was needed to send them crashing down into dust and tiny clutter.

As these three single and unimportant human beings trudged dazedly on in the throng of thousands of others

IN THE 'FRISCO EARTHQUAKE.

just like them, from every side came the adding work of ruin and desolation.

Fire was rearing its head, too. Every here and there, in some house, an upset cook-stove or an overturned lamp had started a blaze.

Clang! clang! clang! What was left of the fire department was trying nobly to respond to the calls.

Policemen tried to handle and direct the throngs, who dumbly obeyed.

Indeed, the police uniform was not necessary; the people were ready to obey any one who seemed to know what order to give.

Though she shivered in the chill air of early morning, Lena seemed not really aware of the scantiness of her attire or that of her child.

Indeed, there were few completely dressed people anywhere in that dense, patiently trudging mob.

They passed a big, open lot where a few had huddled. It was big enough to promise safety, in the middle of the lot, from the toppling of any near-by buildings.

Yet few had stopped to rest in this lot.

Common instinct urged the desolate multitude on out toward the real, open country.

A few blocks further on, and they came to another great vacant lot.

Here, too, few refugees had stopped.

But Lena was holding so heavily to our hero now that he looked at her in dismay.

"Lena," he cried, tenderly, "you're too weak to go further."

"I—I am afraid so," she admitted, grudgingly. "Leave me—get somewhere to safety—you and Elsie."

"Leave you!" panted Bob. "What on earth do you think I am? A cur? A coward? Thank Heaven, I'm an American!"

"But I really cannot go much further, and you cannot carry me."

"No; but you'll be safe in that vacant lot over there. See! There are very few people there. We'll go to the middle of the lot, and there you'll be as safe as you can be anywhere."

Very willingly Lena Rivers turned her steps as he directed.

Elsie, too dazed even to think, had uttered hardly a word all the way.

Here, in the middle of the big vacant lot, Bob let his friend slide down to a seat on the ground, Elsie dropping beside her.

"There, you're all right now!" cheered Bob.

Then the tremendous thought struck him again—with keener force than ever.

That box! That precious box that he almost found, back at the house in devastated Hayes Street.

"Lena," he cried, bending down over her, "can you spare me for a little while?"

"Oh!" she shuddered, as if he had struck her. "Must you leave me now?"

"I must go back to that house," he thrilled. "I had discovered just too late, that which I sought. I had that wanted proof almost in my hands. Lena, it was hidden in your home all the while! I must go back and get it now."

Bravely she shook off fear and looked up at him, her bloodless lips forming in the smile that she forced for her young protector.

"Yes, you must go, Bob! Run! Hasten! Let nothing stop you! And God bless you and speed you!"

Bob bent lower still, and kissed her, fully, frankly. Then he caught up the child in his arms, and kissed her too.

Then, setting Elsie beside her mother, he turned and sped off down Market Street.

But it soon proved impossible to get downtown, a single individual against that steady, patient, drudging, trudging crowd headed the other way.

Bragg was forced to take to side streets.

Here he made more rapid progress, though, several times, he had hair-breadth escapes from falling walls that all but caught and crushed him.

At points he had to all but halt, while he fought his way over the ruined heaps of what once were homes, now lying in heaps in the streets.

"What the earthquake didn't get the fire will!" groaned the boy, as, looking upward, he saw the dense blanket of smoke that already hung over the doomed town.

He was moving, even if swiftly, as though he walked and ran in a trance.

Instinct played a bigger part than will just now.

He knew that he was headed for lower Hayes Street, and somehow he got there. In fact, he turned the corner nearest to the house that had once held his lodging.

Part of the building was down in the street now.

The rest of it looked certain to fall within the hour.

But Bob darted to the ruined doorway.

"Here! Don't go in there!" bellowed a neighbor, a man named Schmidt, who had owned, until the earthquake came, a fine sausage shop a few doors away.

But Bob Bragg never stopped to listen.

He darted into the hallway and looked at the stairway. That was still standing, though the timbers bulged and the balustrade was twisted out of all shape.

It didn't look like a one-in-ten chance that the stairs would hold his weight.

If they gave, they would pull down other timbers on his head—drag the whole house down, most likely, and crush his life out under the ruins.

Yet Bob Bragg spent hardly a second in sizing up the situation.

He was a boy of one idea, now, and he went on softly but swiftly up the stairs.

Boards creaked under him. His footing was swaying. He didn't care.

If the building and life held out, long enough, he would reach that room.

He would wrench away the concealing mop-board, even

though he brought swift, crushing death down upon himself.

He reached his old room, crossed the now upturned threshold—glided inside.

Then he halted—stunned, wild-eyed, hardly breathing.

The mop-board had been entirely wrenched away.

It lay across the room, in fact, at a distance that the forces of nature could not have hurled it.

With eyes staring wildly, the boy tottered forward, fell upon his knees close to the bared hole in the wall.

He looked feverishly in. There was nothing there now but a hole and space.

Yes! More! Imbedded in the thick dust of years was the unmistakable imprint of a box of just the size of that which he had been seeking!

"Gone?" he throbbed, his heart seeming to stop its beating.

No, it couldn't be!

Who would break into a tottering house on the chance of finding an old tin box?

Yet, though he tore feverishly through dust, exploring every corner that he could find in between the walls, there was no trace of a box.

It hadn't dropped, either, for the flooring, here, was unbroken.

"I begin to understand," shivered the boy, miserably.

"The board was partly torn away. A prowler, seeking what he could find to steal, thought some one had been trying to pry away the board to get at a treasure. He completely wrenched the board away, found the box, thought it contained valuables, and so made off with it. But can he have gotten far?"

This time Bob paid no heed to the ricketty stairs.

He fairly flew down them, the stairs giving way behind him with a dull crash.

"Schmidt!" he fairly yelled, rushing into the street.

"Vell?" demanded the dazed sausage maker.

"Did you see anybody in Mrs. Rivers' house?"

"Maybe I did," came the slow answer.

"Think! And think quick! Talk quick, too!"

"Vell, I'm thinking."

"Hurry up. Did you see any one enter the house since the 'quake?"

"Yah, I did," finally answered the German.

"Man, woman, boy or girl?"

"A man."

"What did he look like?"

"Like a man."

"Oh, of course!" groaned Bob. "But describe him. What was there noticeable about him?"

"Vell, he had on his face—"

"Of course he had, you stupid. But what about his face?"

"He had on his face—"

"There you go again!"

"He had on his face," repeated the stolid Schmidt, "a scar that was shaped like this."

On his own cheek the sausage maker traced the outline of a long scar.

"Shaped like a new moon—is that it?" breathed Bob, eagerly.

"Yah."

"Did you see him bringing anything out with him?"

"Only a little tin box."

Only!

"That's what I want—what he stole from me!" flashed Bob. "Which way did he go?"

"That way," pointing toward Market Street.

"How long ago?"

"Not more than a minute before you came this way."

"Oh! Missed him by sixty seconds!"

Bob Bragg fairly gulped down his chagrin and disappointment.

Desperately he plied a few more swift questions.

Now that Schmidt had become interested he could talk more swiftly.

"Thanks! And I'm off!" shouted Bob, backward over his shoulder.

"Vere you go now?"

"To find Scar-face, of course!"

If the fellow had gone toward Market Street, then of course he had followed the general swarm out toward Bernal Heights.

It ought to be easy enough to find Scar-face!

CHAPTER III.

THE DEATH SENTENCE FOR LOAFING.

"A minute's start at first! Not more than five altogether! I can find him if I'm hustling in luck!"

It did seem easy, at the outset, but Bob soon realized how much time the search would take.

Though he could plunge onward through the slowly-moving throngs, he had to tarry long enough to get a look at each grown man.

Bob, an hour before, would hardly have believed there were so many men in all San Francisco as he had to look over now!

Still groaning inwardly, he covered the first half mile.

Then, still on the right hand side of Market Street, as close as he dared to be to the rows of tottering buildings, he came upon a real jolt!

There in the gutter lay an object in tin that made his heart leap.

"The box—it must be the box!" he gasped.

Down upon it he swooped. He picked it up.

Then a sob of horror escaped him.

For, on the under side, the box showed how it had been forced open.

Either a knife or a can-opener had been forced into the tin.

Half way around the box a jagged line had been cut.

The box was empty.

"Of course," our hero shuddered, "it may not be the

same box. But Scar-face! If he found a paper, he must still have it!"

Dropping the box, our hero sprang forward under a stronger impulse than before.

It at least seemed highly probable that Scar-face had passed this way.

"I'm on the right track, anyway!" the boy quivered, as he hurried forward, blindly elbowing his way through those who blundered into his way. "Oh, you scoundrel! You thief! You've a treasure—worth nothing to you, but honor and fortune to us!"

Then came a thought that fairly dizzied the young seeker.

"What if the fellow, realizing that it was worthless to him, tossed the paper away somewhere?"

Bob stopped, leaning for support against a lamp-post that had been left standing.

For the moment he felt so weak that it seemed impossible to keep erect without aid.

"Oh, he wouldn't do that!" groaned the terrified boy.

And yet he was forced to admit that it would be the most natural thing in the world to throw away a thing that seemed to be useless.

"I don't know about that, though!" faltered the boy, looking about him at the slowly-flowing human stream. "Most of these folks are still carting away useless things. Look at that man!"

The man in question, wearing only a bath-robe, was hugging to him, as his sole item of baggage, a bird-cage, badly twisted out of shape and minus a bird of any kind.

Had Bob been less tortured of soul, he would have laughed outright at the ludicrous sight.

And others, all around him, were carrying useless things in their dumb flight.

There was a woman, old, bent and withered—a woman who looked as if it would require all her strength to keep herself going. Yet she toted a heavy flat-iron in either hand!

"Oh, Scar-face will have the paper, if only I can find him!" Bob tried to assure himself.

Behind, a conflagration was raging. Thousands of homes and business buildings at the lower end of the town were already in flames.

Hayes Valley, out of which Bob Bragg had got just in time, was now pouring up dull, dirty yellow smoke like a volcano.

A slight change in the wind would bring the conflagration rushing out this way, licking up all the wooden ruins in its path.

But Bob cared not for fires—cared not for anything, now, except to find that precious paper which meant all in all in the world to himself and his mother.

He was soon coming, though, to the vacant lot where he had left Mrs. Rivers and Elsie.

He must stop there just long enough to tell them what it was that must absorb all his thoughts for the present.

Just by luck Bob chanced to glance down one of the side streets as he hurried along.

Then, swiftly, he stopped short.

"That looks like the description of—" began the boy, throbbing curiously.

The man at whom he was staring turned—a short, thick-set, smooth-faced man as dark as if he had been a Spaniard.

But it was at his left cheek that our hero stared with a fascination that made him tremble.

There was a deep, purplish disfigurement—just the shape of a new moon.

"Scar-face! It can't be any other!" quivered Bob.

Swifter than thought the boy raced down the side street. He halted, pantingly, before the man.

"But I can't go at him like a thief—it wouldn't be poliey," young Bragg realized.

So, instead:

"I beg your pardon—" he began, tremulously.

"It's granted," smiled Scar-face.

"I want to ask you a question—a fearfully important one."

"Go ahead, lad."

"Did you break into a house in Hayes—I beg your pardon again. I am so rattled, like every one else to-day, that I can't think of the right words. But did you explore a house in Hayes Street?"

"Why?"

"Did you go upstairs in a house?"

"Well?"

"Did you find anything there?"

"What are you driving at?" smiled Scar-face.

"See here," blurted the tormented boy, "in a house in Hayes Street, where I lodged, behind a mop-board was a small tin box. It contained just one little paper—"

"Only a paper?" smiled Scar-face, in that same tantalizing way.

Bob stopped short—stumped.

For the life of him he didn't know whether there was anything else in that box.

"I—I don't know," he stammered.

Scar-face's manner changed.

"My lad," he replied, severely, "you are questioning me about something that doesn't really concern you. If that box you speak of had been yours, you would know just what was in it."

"But did you find such a box in Hayes Street?"

"No, I didn't."

Bob's heart sank a few notches. If this was really the thief, then he plainly meant to deny his guilt.

"See here," Bragg pleaded, desperately, "this won't put you in any hole, but it may put me in a big one. All I want is that one solitary paper, and I—"

"What kind of a paper?" interrupted Scar-face, with another tantalizing smile.

This time our hero decided that plain honesty would be the safest course.

"It was a marriage certificate," he said, simply but eloquently. "My mother's. And that paper is the only proof she had that she really was an heiress."

"Romantic!" jeered Scar-face.

"Man, have you a heart at all? Can't you see how tortured I am? Are you going to answer me? Have you that paper?"

"What would it be worth to you to find it?" demanded the man.

Bob hesitated. If he really told the full truth now might not this fellow, if he really had the paper, try to put a blackmailer's price upon it.

"Why, we can't pay for one's own property," Bob answered. "I just want to get it for my mother's sake. Answer me, can't you? Have you got it?"

"When one is claiming property," grinned Scar-face, "there is a little formality he has to go through with."

"What—"

"You ought to identify the paper, lad."

"Have you got it?" flared our hero, desperately.

"What names were in that paper?" continued the man, slowly.

"It was the marriage certificate of Richard Bragg and Ethel Momford."

"Which one wants that paper now?"

"My widowed mother."

"Where does she live now?"

"In Somersby, N. H."

The address came out before Bob had time to think.

Scar-face smiled meaningfully.

"You're sure that this paper isn't worth money?" he insinuated.

"Have you got it?" Bob Bragg fairly roared.

"No; but of course I may hear of it."

"Will you let me look through your pockets—just for that one paper?" pleaded the boy, desperately.

"Rather naturally I will not."

Scar-face laughed, as if this were the most insolent of questions.

"Then I'll make you!" yelled the boy.

There was no time to think. He just simply leaped at the fellow, clutching him by the throat.

The other gripped our hero by shoulder and waist.

Then and there the struggle became desperate—Bob fighting with the sole thought of winning, at any cost.

"Let go of me, you young fiend!" panted Scar-face, who, at the most, was no more than a match for the infuriated boy.

"Not until I've searched you!" quivered the boy.

"Let go of me! I tell you, I haven't got the paper!"

"And I believe you have!"

Back and forth they swayed in the fight. But Bob never once let go.

Now, he was reaching in grim earnest for the fellow's throat, intent on choking him insensible.

Bump! Bragg had forced his man down to the ground, piling on top of him.

"Hurrah!" quivered Bob. "Now, I'll soon be through with you!"

Gur-r-r-r! Gasp! Bragg would soon have his victim choked into quietness.

"Halt! What on earth is this work?"

The butts of muskets rattled on the pavement.

Bob did not turn to look, but in a jiffy a brawn hand had him by the collar, yanking him up off of his man.

"What are you doing, you cub?"

Shake! shake! Bob, twisted around in that tight grip, found himself confronted by a big, angry-looking man in the uniform of a sergeant in the United States Army.

The Regulars from the Presidio had arrived, and were being distributed out through the city, to fight fire and preserve order.

In that twisting grip on his collar Bob went through a touch of just the kind of choking he had been dosing Scar-face with.

"Lemme go!" gasped Bragg, squirming.

"In the hold-up business, are you?" demanded the sergeant, tightening the grip of that one powerful hand until things swam blackly before the boy's now unseeing eyes.

Then, suddenly, our hero was thrown violently to the ground.

It was lucky, indeed, that he was not knocked out thereby, for he heard the click of a rifle-bolt.

Getting his eyes open Bob saw the muzzle of a rifle staring down into his face.

"For heaven's sake, don't shoot—don't murder me!" chaked the boy.

"That's what you were trying to do to the other fellow—good medicine both ways. Pop you go," clicked the sergeant.

"But it was his fault! You're not going to murder me without a hearing, are you?"

"Get up!" ordered the sergeant, raising the muzzle of his weapon. "I'll hear what you've got to say—but our orders are to shoot all desperate characters on sight."

Bounding to his feet, Bob glanced wildly around.

"You've let him get away," quaked the boy. "That was the one that ought to be shot."

"Talk up quick, kid! There's work to do to-day!"

Brokenly our hero tried to tell his story.

But he saw grim disbelief in the sergeant's eyes.

"You're lying, so you might as well shut up," came the swift military decision. "But you're too young to shoot for a first offense. Fall in with us, and we'll put you to work."

"But I've got to find—"

"Just one more word of kick," warned the sergeant, "and I'll pop you over for it. Fall in—or die!"

This was martial law with a vengeance, but there was no help for it.

That sergeant had a cool, business-like eye that could be wicked at need.

Bob fell in.

"Forward," ordered the sergeant.

And now the purpose of this expedition was apparent.

Turning into Market Street, the soldiers, more than a dozen in number, stopped every able-bodied looking man that they met.

These troops were joined, a little further down, by other detachments, each of which had a gang of men strong enough to work.

Hundreds of men were thus rounded up under guard. Hundreds of others followed willingly enough without being forced.

"Oh, it's all right," the boy admitted, groaning to himself. "It's right to make every man and boy work for the common good on an awful day like this. But if I could only make these soldiers realize what it means to me to be free until I settle with Scar-face!"

A little later Bob realized that, even if he were freed by these soldiers, he would be promptly impressed by others wherever he went.

"There's no help for it," he sighed. "I guess I'll have to stand by and take my dose as long as the others do. But, when I once get free, if I once find Scar-face——!"

Boom! Bang!

Bob had been marched into Hayes Street once more.

Now several blocks of this once hustling business street were on fire in spots.

Soldiers were aiding the firemen.

While the department fought the flames, the military employed dynamite in blowing up buildings wherever requested to prevent the spread of the flames.

"There's your job," said Bob's sergeant. "Get in with those men and help cart the timbers out."

They had halted before the ruins of a house, as yet untouched by flames.

Yet the house lay in ruins—a dry mass of rotten wood that would burn like tinder if once it got afire.

Down the street a bit were the glowing embers of four houses that had burned.

This dry, rotten timber in the wreck was carried out and thrown, a few pieces at a time, in the middle of the burned section.

Blazing here, the timbers could communicate no fire to other buildings.

For an hour Bob toiled thus.

After that he was set to packing small boxes of dynamite for soldiers further up in Hayes Valley.

Bob had had no breakfast. There was no luncheon coming.

He was fairly faint with hunger, but so were hundreds of others toiling in that hot, blazing, suffocating neighborhood.

A few thoughtful, earnest women had started to make coffee and pass it around, but even this had been stopped. The military were passing orders forbidding any one to light a fire in a stove, lest another shock of earthquake might upset the stove and add to the conflagration.

Once in a while only, Bob stopped long enough to wipe away the grimy sweat and to take a few deep breaths.

But there was no rest. Soldiers stretched up and down the street, and they were relentless task-masters, under orders to promptly shoot any one who balked at toiling.

But the fire grew, forcing the toilers back.

Once, as he fell back with the others, Bob caught sight, at a corner, of the dark, evil features of Scar-face.

For a wonder, that fellow did not seem to have been impressed.

Then, like a flash, our hero saw and understood.

To his left sleeve Scar-face had pinned a Red Cross. To all appearances he was engaged in works of mercy instead of toil.

But Bob hardly stopped to think of all these things at the moment.

"My chance, now!" thrilled the boy, darting off at his man.

"Stop the kid!" roared a sergeant.

Whump! The butt of a musket landed in Bragg's stomach, sending him to the ground.

"Stand him upon his feet," was the sergeant's next order, as he swiftly approached.

"Too much loafing around here!" growled the sergeant. "We need an example. Men, I'll show you the way to put a stop to loafing. Stand away from him! I'm going to shoot!"

Click! went the hammer bolt, as the sergeant took swift aim at Bob Bragg's heart!

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE MAZE OF DISASTER NIGHT.

There was no hesitation or "bluff" in the sergeant's manner.

On that day of disaster in San Francisco it was necessary for the soldiers to shoot down scores of trouble-makers, balkers and thieves.

Wherever it was necessary, the shooting was done without loss of an instant's time.

The military was supreme, and no one questioned the shootings.

Bob was doomed out of hand, because it looked as if he had sought to dodge work.

"Stop, sergeant!"

Up came the muzzle of the rifle a trifle. The sergeant glanced around.

"What are you shooting that boy for?" demanded a captain of the Regular Army, hastening up.

"For an example, sir."

"Right enough. But what has he been doing?"

"Trying to loaf!"

"Is that all?"

"I thought it enough, sir."

"But he's only a boy."

"Old enough to work, sir."

"But perhaps not old enough to think clearly, sergeant. Let him go, but shoot him without saying a word, if you catch him loafing again."

"Very good, sir," replied the sergeant, saluting his officer.

Then, turning to Bob, the sergeant added:

"Get back to work on the run!"

"Stop, boy!" countermanded the captain, and Bob, in the third step of a sprint, came to a plumb halt.

"Catch that hulking big fellow that's sneaking off there!" ordered the captain, pointing down the street. "Bring him back with you!"

Finding himself pursued, the big man, who looked like a laborer, took to his legs in earnest.

But three or four of the fastest sprinters among the Regulars overtook the fugitive. He drew a pistol and shot at his captors, wounding a soldier. But they quickly disarmed him.

Back they marched him, the fellow whining and pleading.

"Stand him up against the wall there," ordered the captain, sternly. "Now, then, sergeant, try your aim on him!"

Click! crack! The big fellow who had tried to run away dropped to the sidewalk.

Then, turning to our hero, the officer added:

"You got away this time, boy, but you won't the next!"

"I thank you, sir," Bragg breathed, earnestly. "And I assure you, sir, that I wasn't trying to run away. It was a mistake."

"Don't let such a mistake occur again," smiled the captain, grimly.

"Here, kid, you help tote this carcass up the street and drop it into good live embers, somewhere," commanded the sergeant.

Two other men got hold with Bob.

It was tough, sad, grisly work, carrying this dead body to feed it to the flames.

But it did not do to falter before military who acted with such decision and promptness.

"I've got to hustle back to my job now," quivered Bob, "or I'll get a sure-enough dose this time."

He was still white as chalk.

It's enough to scare a fellow, to be stood up against a well to be shot to death.

And it's doubly tough when the shooting is done for an offense that wasn't intentionally committed.

"If I had got it, that fellow who was shot might have gotten away unhurt," thought the boy, uneasily, as he toiled.

Not a tenth part of what he did that fearful day could Bob remember afterwards.

He did whatever he was ordered to by the soldiers or by a fire chief.

For an hour or two he would work in the face of flames, trying to fight back fire with a gang of soldier-driven men and boys.

At another time he would be sent scurrying for drinking water, armed with a bucket.

Among other disasters, the water mains had burst.

All the water that was to be had came from the few pumps that could be found here and there.

By nightfall Bob, still without food, was aiding a doctor who had started a temporary hospital at a street corner.

Ten o'clock came. Bob had done nothing but hustle for seventeen long hours.

Through with helping the doctor bandage a man whose legs had been burned, our hero leaned against a wall that was still standing.

He swayed, almost fell.

The doctor, pausing after attending to this last patient, noted the boy's condition.

"What's your name, younker?" asked the medical man.

"Bob Bragg."

"Pretty well beat out, aren't you, Bob?"

"Oh, a little tired."

"Want to quit?"

"Not while there's work to do."

"That's good grit, Bob, but I'm afraid you won't be much more use. You look as if you'd faint, soon."

"Oh, I won't faint," denied Bob, scornfully.

"I'll let you go now."

"And I don't want to go, doctor—not while there is work to be done, and while I can stand up."

"I'm going to send you just the same," smiled the doctor, pulling out his prescription pad.

On a sheet he wrote a statement to the effect that the bearer had been released from further service for the night.

"Captain," hailed the doctor to a passing Army officer, and stated the case.

"Indorse this, will you, please, captain?"

Taking the fountain pen the officer signed mechanically.

"If anybody tries to put you to work again to-night, show him this," directed the doctor. "Now, get off somewhere and sleep on the ground for a few hours."

Truth to tell, our hero was not sorry to avail himself of the chance.

Now that the chance for rest had come, he was more sore and fagged than he had realized.

"Now's the chance to find Lena Rivers," was his next thought. "Whew! Won't she think I've deserted her, though? But she must understand that I wouldn't stay away from her if I could help it."

Market Street was not so thronged, now, as he had found it in the daytime.

Only the fire fighters, the soldiers, the doctors, a few who were still seeking lost ones, were now allowed on this thoroughfare.

As quickly as he could, our hero got past the burned district.

Two or three times he was "held up" by sentries.

In each case all that was necessary was to declare that he had a pass, and to show it.

The smell of smoke, the taste of smoke, was in the air. The stars were hidden behind the dense, dirty yellow pall that hung over the earth.

Further up the street the passers-by were still more scarce.

Automobiles now furnished almost the sole means of transportation. These were being used by the Red Cross people and their allies, the doctors.

Not a few automobile owners, through the day, had been threatened for not quickly enough turning their machines over to the soldiers for Red Cross work.

Every man that he did pass, out of a uniform, Bob scanned closely.

"If I could only get one good, close look at Scar-face!" he thought. "I shall know how to go about it next time. I'll turn him over to the first soldier I meet. It's rough justice that rules to-day, but it's meant to be true justice!"

As well as he could remember, now, he was within a quarter of a mile of the big vacant lot where he had left Mrs. Rivers and Elsie.

"I wonder if they stayed there?" he thought. "Oh, I hope so. Tired as I am, I don't believe I could keep up very long on the hunt."

A girl's scream was heard down a side street as Bob passed the corner.

Stopping, wheeling, he saw a young woman struggling in the arms of a powerfully-built man.

"You dastard!" she cried, shrilly.

"Just your jewelry," leered the fellow, "and I'll let you go!"

But the girl struggled as much as was in her power to do, the fellow all the time trying to get her valuables.

"Help! help! Quick!"

Pit-pat! pit-pat! Bob was off down that side street, forgetting utterly that he was tired.

He did not call out, but—

Whack! his right first landed on the fellow's neck.

Biff! under the rascal's right ear.

Bellowing, the big rough wheeled on the boy.

"Help! help!" screamed the girl, more loudly than ever.

The big fellow had swung.

Bob ducked and dodged, but another blow, glancing though it was, sent him sprawling.

Feet were moving fast now. Three soldiers had heard the girl's screams. Down the street they came at a sprint, though they were doubtless as tired as any in 'Frisco that night.

"You little pig!" gruffed one soldier, halting over prostate Bob and aiming his bayonet.

"Not him!" begged the girl. "He tried to save me. There goes the fellow, away down the street."

"Halt, or we shoot!" yelled another soldier, aiming at the big fugitive.

Crack! A bullet whizzed by the big fellow's head.

He brought up short, with a sudden jar.

"Come back here!" ordered one of the soldiers.

Trembling, the big ruffian hesitatingly returned.

"Stand still there," ordered one of the soldiers, a corporal. "If you move, you get lead. Now, then, lady, what was the trouble?"

"That big brute attacked me," throbbed the girl, indignantly.

"What you got to say about that, Buster?" queried the corporal, grimly.

"The gal lies!" snarled the fellow.

"No, she doesn't!" broke in Bob. "I saw you, and I saw her struggling to get away from you."

"Where'd you get in, younker?" questioned the corporal, wheeling on our hero.

"He came to my rescue," broke in the girl, eagerly. "He attacked that big loafer."

"Sailed into Buster, did the kid, eh?" grinned the corporal.

"He was most brave about it," the girl declared.

"Bully for you, kid," approved the corporal. "You can be trusted with a latch-key to-night."

Then, deliberately, the corporal shot back the bolt of his Krag-Jorgenson rifle.

"Great heavens! What are you going to do?" screamed the terrified brute.

The girl whitened and trembled.

"Just looking to see that my piece is loaded," replied the corporal, grimly.

"For pity's sake, don't butcher me!" begged the brute, hoarsely.

"Younker, see the young lady safely around the corner," ordered the corporal.

"D-don't shoot the wretch!" begged the girl.

"Lady, orders are orders to-night," returned the corporal, respectfully but firmly.

"Come," whispered Bob, laying a hand gently on her arm.

"But it makes me feel like a murderer!" she shuddered.

"Come," Bob insisted, gently.

She let him take her hand and lead her away.

As they went the sobbing pleadings for life of the brute followed them.

That scoundrel had fallen upon his knees. It seemed, indeed, as if he must keel over altogether from his sheer terror.

But the corporal waited grimly, silently, unrelentingly, until he had seen Bob and the girl turn the corner.

Crack! The brute's pleadings ceased, never to be renewed.

Military justice—the surest kind to make people safe by night in that stricken city with its thousands of destroyed homes.

"Oh! oh!" sobbed the girl.

"Never mind," Bob urged. "It's the best thing—the only thing to be done. Be glad that other women are safe from that scoundrel."

They passed a corner where a torch flared. Here a doctor had established a sidewalk hospital.

By the light Bob Bragg got a better look at the girl's face than had been possible before.

Despite her fright and terror, she had a gloriously pretty face. Though apparently not much more than sixteen, she

was inclined to be tall. There was almost the roundness of the woman in her figure.

"Are you staring at me?" asked the girl, suddenly, half in momentary alarm.

"Yes," the boy admitted. "Don't have me shot for it, please. But I couldn't help it—you look so much like one whom I know—whom I like."

"What is her name?" asked the girl, with some interest.

"Mrs. Lena Rivers."

"Why," cried the girl, starting back, "that's my sister's name."

"Then you're—Nan?" cried Bob, delightedly.

"Yes. You've heard of me, then?"

"Rather!" ejaculated Bob. "At least twenty times a day, I reckon."

"Who are you?"

"I've been lodging with your sister."

"Then you're Robert Bragg?"

"The same, and very much at your service, Nan—I beg pardon, Miss Rivers. You must excuse me; you see, I have learned to call your sister by her name."

"You may call me Nan, if you choose," permitted the girl, smiling. "I know that Lena took a great liking to you. She wrote me about you. Where is my sister?"

"I'm looking for her now," Bob replied.

"Our house escaped in the Potrero," the girl went on, hurriedly. "I came through to look for Lena as soon as the police and the guards would allow me to. Have you seen her since this morning?"

"I left her on a vacant lot near here," Bob explained, hastily. "Later, I was put to work by the soldiers. But—there's the lot, I believe, right ahead."

"Let us hurry, then!"

Hand in hand they raced on to the lot.

Three soldiers stood on guard there.

"What do you want here?" demanded one of them, throwing his gun to port as he got in the boy's way.

"I left this young lady's sister here this morning. We're looking for her."

"Pass on in, then," permitted the sentry.

That lot was a curious looking place, now.

There were probably three hundred people there, sleeping, or at least lying down. None was permitted to prowl about except by special permission—and the penalty for disobedience was a rifle bullet!

In the lot were two more sentries, who eyed Bob and the girl curiously as they moved about.

But they completed the weary rounds of the sleepers without finding Mrs. Rivers there.

"Sentry," demanded Bob, approaching one of the soldiers, "have you seen the woman we're looking for?"

He gave a hurried description of Lena.

"Sorry for you two!" replied the soldier. "See that blazing ruin of a wall over at the end of the lot? She was caught under it."

"Badly hurt?" quivered Bob.

"Killed, I believe," answered the soldier, pityingly. Flop! Bob was supporting Nan Rivers in his arms. She had fainted.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SLAVE GANG.

Awkwardly but effectively the soldier helped Bob bring the girl back to life.

In the meantime, our hero had learned the particulars. Mrs. Rivers, after being hauled out from under the fallen wall, was pronounced probably dead, but she had been taken to a big stable that was still standing a block and a half away.

This place was being used as a hospital.

"And the child?" Bob asked, falteringly.

"Oh, the kid was let go with her mother."

"Then the child wasn't hurt?"

"Didn't seem to be."

Nan was opening her eyes now.

"Come," urged the boy, taking the most effective way to rouse her, "you've simply got to get up and be strong. We're going to your sister."

"But she's dead!" quavered Nan.

"If she is, your little niece isn't. Come, Miss Rivers, we've got to find that little child before she's lost to us!"

Nan soon declared that she was strong enough to walk along.

Together the young people set off on the weary pilgrimage.

Bob, though he would have died sooner than admit it, was now so fagged and foot-sore that every step gave him pain.

But they reached the stable.

A flaring torch, set in the ground outside, proclaimed the hospital.

"We're looking for a woman who was brought here," Bob murmured to the sentry, who nodded and let them pass in.

Inside the stable at least a hundred forms lay on the floor.

The light there was wretchedly dull.

Two doctors and half a dozen impromptu nurses were busy over patients just come in.

But Lena Rivers was not among them.

Going to the rear of the stable, in the dim light, Bob saw the white flutter of Elsie's little robe.

The child, worn out with her little vigil, was at last fast asleep at her mother's head.

Nan sank sobbingly down beside her sister, kissing the still, white face again and again.

But Bob, practical, as always, felt of Lena's hands.

"Why, there's warmth in her skin. I don't believe she's dead," proclaimed Bragg.

Like a shot he was up and off, though he limped as he ran in and out among the patients.

"Doctor, come quick, can't you?" he begged. "That woman over there with the child I don't believe is dead."

"She seemed to be, all right," replied one of the physicians, wearily, as he turned.

"But her skin is still warm."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes; come, please!"

Wearily, the worn-out doctor rose and went over to Lena. He felt at her hands, then of her neck, next at her pulse.

"There may be a little life here," he admitted, at length. "We'll see."

He returned with his medicine case, prepared a dose, and forced it down Lena's throat.

Then artificial respiration was started. Lena began to stir slightly.

"Why, we have got a spark of life here," admitted the physician. "I don't want to say yet, though, that we're going to pull her through."

"Work, and we'll back you up!" Bob throbbed. "Oh, Nan, it's going to turn out all right, after all!"

"Don't be too sure of that," warned the doctor.

Nan, strangely calm, said not a word, though she moved instantly whenever the physician told her to do anything.

And then, at last, Lena opened her eyes again, with a sigh.

"Going to get up and live again, aren't you?" smiled the doctor.

"I—I'm choking inside," whispered Mrs. Rivers, faintly.

"Swallowed some smoke, didn't you?"

"I—I think I did."

"Asphyxiation," muttered the medical man, after sounding her chest. "We must try not to let her sink back into unconsciousness. What we need is a pint of milk. If we had that—but we might as well ask for the moon."

"I'll go out and try," quivered Bob, starting up.

There followed half an hour of rapid hustling by a youngster who limped at every step.

But he found it at last, found it in the possession of a woman whose baby had died that night.

Buying the pint of milk for a dollar, young Bragg hurried back with it.

"Wonders!" cried the doctor, who had just barely succeeded in keeping Lena Rivers aroused. "Now, she'll be all right."

The first portion of the milk was forced down Lena's throat.

After that she was able to sit up and sip the rest.

"That's the only stuff for smoke-swallowing," smiled the doctor. "Now, you're going to be all right, madam."

"Oh, I feel all right now," smiled Lena.

"I owe my own safety and my sister's life to you," murmured Nan, impulsively, resting her hand in Bob's.

"Come, youngster, sorry to disturb you," called the doctor. "But this place is for sick people. You'll have to find some other place for the night."

Taking hasty leave of Nan and Lena, Bob started for the door.

Judging from the feeling in his feet, it took him an hour to get back to that vacant lot.

But he got there, was allowed to lie down, and swiftly was fast asleep.

Dead slumber that was. Too tired even to dream, Bob lay there motionless until a rough hand on his shoulder roused him.

It was morning—daylight—a dull, murky morning.

"Come, younker," ordered a soldier, gruffly, "get up and eat. Then the chain gang wants you!"

Food was being distributed from a wagon at the curb.

Under the eyes of the sentries, Bob passed out and got his share.

He was not so sore as the night before, but still stiff.

Wonderfully enough that food revived him.

It woke up his brain, too, as he sat there on the ground, eating and studying the faces of the three or four hundred people around him.

"If only Scar-face were here!" he groaned. "The sight of him would make me feel as fresh as a game-cock, I believe. Oh, when will this excitement and work quiet down enough so that I can go in chase of him?"

From the way things looked this morning after the earthquake, it might be weeks before the soldiers stopped rounding up every man and boy for work.

And now another great start came to our hero.

"Great Scott! I was big enough fool to tell Scar-face where my mother lived. Now, if Scar-face gets out of this alive, and if he dreams how important that paper is, he'll have a chance to find out why my mother needs the certificate. Then he can bleed us, or——"

Bob fairly shook with sudden terror.

"Gracious! Scar-face might sell that paper to the other heir—Hen Olstead! From all I've heard, Olstead is money-grabber enough to buy and cheat and disgrace my mother!"

The cold sweat was standing out on the boy's face.

"Come on, you husky ones. Tumble out there and march downtown to your jobs."

A sergeant with a jovial face, who did not look as if he could be severe enough to shoot a man, was rounding up all who looked as if they could work.

No man or well-grown boy hung back.

The lessons administered by the shootings the day before had done their work!

Though he fairly ached to know how Lena and her sister and little Elsie were doing this dull, terrible morning, Bob meekly took his place in the squad.

He was a slave for the time being—but a slave of stern necessity, a forced toiler for the common good of all in that stricken city.

Through the night fire had swept block after block of dwellings and other buildings off the real estate map.

"You look pretty lame, kid," remarked the sergeant, observing Bob, as he took a few steps in the squad of fifty or more forced laborers.

"Just a little bit," smiled the boy.

"Fit to work?"

"Sure!" flared Bragg, promptly.

With all this stern need of work he would have felt ashamed to shirk.

"Wonder if we couldn't send you to something easier than fighting fire."

"I don't care how easy it is," Bob admitted, rather wistfully, "if only it's useful—man's work, you understand!"

"Say, you're no baby," the sergeant admitted, admiringly. "Fall out!"

Here was the chance for respite—for a chance to do something that would be less of a strain on the aching feet.

Just then another rounded-up squad of "slaves" came down the street under guard of the Regulars.

It moved in close beside the squad in which our hero stood.

Something made the boy turn around.

Scar-face! There he stood, safely captured, a few yards back down the line.

"Fall out, kid," repeated the sergeant, a trifle impatiently.

"Are these squads going to work together?" Bragg questioned, in a low voice.

"Yep."

"Then I'll go on with the crowd, sergeant."

"You're foolish, kid, with them feet. Fall out!"

"I can stand it as well as the others. Let me go, please."

"All right. You've got grit. Shake!"

The sergeant gave his hand a quick, rough pressure, then stepped away.

"I wonder," flashed Bob, "if that sergeant would make Scar-face turn his pockets out for me? By jingo, I'll find out!"

A sentry had moved up close, keeping a watchful eye over these "slaves."

"I want to fall out just a minute to speak to the sergeant," Bob pleaded.

"Stay where you are. The 'sarge' has troubles of his own," retorted the soldier.

"Let me fall out just a minute, please!"

"If you do, you get plugged!"

"But this is terribly important, sentry."

"Shut up!" retorted the soldier, roughly.

He fingered his piece in a suggestive way that made Bob instantly silent.

"No matter," throbbed the boy. "I'll be working in the same gang with Scar-face to-day. He can't get away from me. Oh, I'll find my chance!"

Promptly enough the line moved off.

To-day the gang was turned in through Valencia street, and so across town to the burning district higher up from Market Street.

"I want twenty men—good capable ones—down in that block with me!" roared a fire chief, driving by in his buggy.

A corporal hastily told them off from the gang.

Scar-face was one of them—Bob wasn't.

And, by this time, our hero had learned the temper of the soldiers better than to beg for favors.

"Kid, I reckon you can handle a shovel. Get over in that yard, and go to work. They say there's water to be got under the surface hereabouts."

A dozen of the weaker ones were sent into a yard. Here, shovels were given to half the number at a time. Under the orders of a soldier the two shifts relieved each other in the work of digging a great, round hole.

It was not hard digging down through the sand, but soon clay was struck, and after that the work went with painful slowness.

Up to noon Bob Bragg toiled and did his share. No one got any lunch, but an hour's rest was permitted, for all of these weaker ones had aching backs.

Then, at one o'clock, back to work they went.

Not far away crowds of wistful women and children had gathered, waiting with buckets, pans, mugs, 'old tin cans—anything, for the city was now suffering from thirst.

At three o'clock water was struck.

Now the eager sufferers from thirst tried to press forward.

It was necessary to station more soldiers about the well, while the tired-out diggers worked for another hour deepening the hole.

"That's deep enough, now, men," called down an Army lieutenant. "Pile out, and we'll start that water going around."

Bob Bragg, released from toil for the while, was glad enough to lie down on the ground until his next work came to him.

An hour he lay there, hugely enjoying the well-earned rest.

A constant stream was going and coming.

At last a man with two wooden buckets forced his way through the crowd about the well.

"The firemen want some water to drink," he shouted.

"All right," nodded the young Army officer.

At sound of that newcomer's voice Bob Bragg started quickly, even if painfully, to his feet.

Yes; there stood Scar-face, who, having passed on his buckets, was idly waiting until they came back to him filled.

"Now, it's time you did the right thing by me," whispered Bob, taking hold of the fellow's arm.

"You clear out of here," muttered Scar-face, turning and recognizing the boy.

"Not until you give me that paper of mine!" vaunted the boy.

"I haven't got any paper that belongs to you."

"That's a lie, and you know it."

"Get out!"

"See here," threatened Bob, "if you don't do right, I'll appeal to that young officer over there. And I believe he'll do the right thing. You know what'll happen if these soldiers find you've been robbing me."

Scar-face's cheeks showed suddenly pallid under their bronze.

"I don't want to see you shot—I don't hate you enough for that," breathed Bob, tremulously. "But I want that paper, and I'm going to have it, even if it costs your life. Give me that paper!"

"Get out, you cub!"

"Then I'm going to the lieutenant!" glared Bragg, turning away.

Swish! Here came Scar-face's buckets, filled, back along the line.

"Lieutenant!" appealed the boy, hurrying up to the young Army officer.

"Don't bother me!" ordered the young Army man, sharply.

"But——"

"Shut up and fall back. I can't listen to the sore-toe yarns of kids to-day."

"Just one——"

"Hustle him back!" commanded the worn-out lieutenant.

Hustled Bob certainly was. He was passed from soldier to soldier until he fell to the ground at the end of the line.

As he went down he had a glimpse of Scar-face disappearing into the multitude beyond.

"Another chance gone!" groaned Bob. "I wonder if Scar-face and I will be quartered together to-night. Oh, I must have one more chance at him, if it costs me my life!"

Soldiers passed by, later on, rounding up more men for work.

But they took in Bob's worn-out look.

He escaped further toil, and got instead a warming bit of the Army rations that were passed around that night.

"We'll want you here to-morrow, boy," said the lieutenant, halting beside our hero after dark. "So you'd better sleep here to-night. Having gotten that order, I suppose you know better than to try to sneak away."

"I don't want to sneak. I'm ready for all the work I can stand up to."

"Good enough," said the lieutenant, grimly.

"Can you listen to just a few words now, sir?"

"What about?"

In as few impassioned words as he could, Bob poured out the story of his troubles with Scar-face.

The lieutenant listened keenly, then called a corporal.

"My man, if an individual with a crescent-shaped scar shows up here again, and if this boy identifies him, see if he has a marriage certificate in his clothes. If he has, give it to me when you see me next. Remember that! It's to be turned over to me personally, until I have a chance to find out where it belongs."

Saluting, the corporal fell back.

Bob tried to pour out his thanks, but the young officer, nodding curtly, moved away.

The guard was changing now. Soldiers on duty through the day were relieved by night squads.

Worn out, our hero stretched himself out on the ground. Almost instantly he was asleep.

A dozen others lay there asleep, near the well.

As Bob slept, Scar-face again approached with the buckets.

"That boy here still?" quivered the wretch, stopping short. "Curse him! He seems bent on tracking me to my death at the hands of these savages of soldiers!"

Scar-face took a hurried, startled look around.

There were two sentries out by the sidewalk—no one stirring close at hand.

Stealthily the wretch thrust his hand inside his clothing, bringing out a knife.

Another swift look around. Then Scar-face, bending, aimed for the sleeping boy's heart, and plunged his knife in;

CHAPTER VI.

THE NIGHT SURPRISE.

Thrust!

The knife sunk in.

Then Scar-face started back, an exclamation of amazement trembling on his lips.

For the point of the blade had penetrated barely a small part of an inch.

Then the thrust failed. Bob awoke with a scream.

In a twinkling the wretch had tossed his knife over into the well.

"You here?" panted Bob.

Scar-face had fallen back, sitting on the ground.

Sore and aching as he was, the boy rose enough to fall forward on his enemy.

"Now we've got you—and the soldiers'll take care of you!" throbbed Bob.

In that moment of contact our hero distinctly felt the rustling of a paper in Scar-face's breast pocket.

"Help!" roared the wretch.

"Yes; that's what we want!" mocked Bragg, as he grabbed at the fellow's throat.

Hearing the call, the sentry came running up.

He was tired out, that soldier—worn to pieces with four times as much duty as he should have had.

It was not easy to distinguish.

Bob Bragg was on top, gripping the throat of the man underneath.

Thump! Dazed by the blow from a rifle-butt over his head, our hero rolled off his enemy, and lay there, still and white.

"Well, rather!" muttered Scar-face, laconically, as he got up. "Why didn't you shoot that young scoundrel?"

"Oh, we've got a tip to let up on the shooting a bit in ordinary cases," replied the soldier.

"That cub ought to be killed, for he was trying to kill me," uttered the wretch.

But the soldier shook his head.

"Like to oblige, pardner, but the case don't seem serious enough."

"He'll kill me," argued Scar-face, "if he comes out of this."

"You ought to be able to handle a kid like that," urged the sentry.

"Not if he sneaks upon me from behind, as he did just now. He almost had me. If you had been a few seconds later you couldn't have saved me."

"It didn't look as bad as that," retorted the soldier, coolly.

"Shoot the young scoundrel, won't you?"

"No, sirree!"

"Then, if you're too tender-hearted, let me have the rifle a few seconds."

"See here, pardner," retorted the sentry, "you're too eager. It's up to you to march. Savvy?"

With a growl, Scar-face started.

He failed to pick up his buckets, not daring to linger there against the chance that the boy would come to.

It was ten minutes before our hero got his senses back.

When he did he sat up, feeling dismally of the great lump that the gun-butt had raised on his head.

He gazed around, saw the buckets, which, in the absence of Scarface, explained well enough that the wretch had fled.

"Will this hard luck never end?" groaned the boy. "Every time I've tried to get the square deal I've got the square knock-out instead!"

He tried his legs, finding himself rather rickety on them.

"Hullo!" grinned the sentry, as our hero approached in the darkness. "Came out of it, did you?"

"Little you care whether I did or not!" muttered Bob, wrathily.

"Oh, come now, kid, I ain't as bad as you may think; but I'm put here to keep peace and encourage brotherly love. What am I to do when I find you choking the life out of a stranger?"

"That's the fellow you had orders to catch!" glared the boy.

"Had orders to catch, eh?"

"Yes; the fellow with a crescent-shaped scar on his face."

"Never heard of the orders."

"You didn't?"

Bob stared aghast.

"Nope! Nary order."

"But the lieutenant in command here gave the order to a corporal. I heard him do it."

"Then the corp forgot to pass it on."

Bob realized, with another groan, that this was likely enough.

All of the soldiers on duty in San Francisco had been so sadly overworked, and were so tired, that the wonder was that they remembered any orders at all.

"I've got to go in search of that fellow," sighed Bob. "I can't lose him again."

"Take my advice, and don't," grinned the sentry. "You'll sure get a hole shot through you if you went prowling around at this time of the night. I'd shoot anyone, myself, who snooped around here, unless he had buckets for water."

"But I must find him."

"You can't leave this lot. It's your place to work. Don't try to go, or you'll be sorry."

Again there was nothing to do but obey orders. The sentry represented nearly all there was of law in the stricken city. His gun offered a powerful argument against balking.

"Get some sleep," advised the soldier.

"I'm afraid to sleep, even," confessed the boy, "See here, that scoundrel tried to stab me through the heart. Look at the hole in the cloth."

It was not much of a hole, but it was big enough to see.

"What saved you?" asked the sentry, curiously.

"A bank book and a wallet in my inner vest pocket," Bob replied, producing them.

He held up the wallet to show the mark of the point of Scar-face's knife.

"Now do you believe me?" demanded the boy.

"It looks like straight goods."

"Then will you let me leave here to go in search of that fellow?"

"No—for you'd only get shot by some other sentry."

The tone was firm. Bob realized the folly or arguing.

"If you're afraid to go back into the lot to sleep, lay down near this post," advised the sentry. "Then I can have my eye on you."

"But if that wretch comes back?"

"Then I'll take a chance on holding him up and waking you up to talk with him."

"You'll really do that?" questioned the boy, eagerly.

"Sure thing, kid."

With a sigh, and suppressing a groan of pain, Bragg lay down once more.

Fagged out as he was, it was necessary only to lie down to be asleep within the minute.

For hours, despite the pain in his head, which made him roll uneasily at times, he slept on.

He slept, in fact, until a hand on his shoulder, vigorously applied, brought him to his senses.

"Time to go to work?" muttered the boy.

But as he opened his eyes he saw the lieutenant bending at his side.

"The sentry has reported to me, Bragg," went on Lieutenant Pelham, kindly. "I'm sorry that order didn't get around last night, or you'd have had your man. Let me see that bank book of yours that stopped the knife. Whew! But someone certainly did try to stab you!"

"If the sentry had known that order of yours, my troubles would have been solved," groaned the boy.

"It was the corporal's fault in forgetting to pass the order," admitted the lieutenant. "But don't blame the

corporal, Bragg. Don't blame any of us poor devils of soldiers. We've had a tougher time than you or anyone else can ever guess. We have to keep moving to keep awake. If the government doesn't get more troops here soon we'll all be in a hospital camp. And now, boy," continued the lieutenant, kindly, as he seated himself on the ground, and began to write in a note-book, "I am going to do the best thing I can for you. I've no right to do it, but I'm doing it, right or no right."

"What?" asked Bob, wonderingly.

"You've worked well and hard, Bragg, and you're played out. I'm writing you a pass which calls upon the military all over the city to let you go where you please, and not to press you for any labor. I may get jerked over the coals for writing such a pass—but here it is, anyway, youngster."

"My, but that's good of you!" murmured the boy, gratefully, as he took the precious bit of paper.

"And one more document for you," smiled the officer. "I know General Funston fairly well, from having served on his staff. He's a brick—Funston! He's being worked to death, but he'll find a minute to give to your troubles if you can get to him with this note. I have told him that I believe your story, and have suggested that he do all he can for you. General Funston, you'll find out at the Presidio. He commands the military here. Try to get to him."

Tears welled into Bob Bragg's eyes.

Choking, he tried to stammer his thanks for all this unexpected kindness.

"There! that'll do!" smiled the lieutenant, laying a hand over the boy's mouth. "I know how you feel about it. I'm right glad to do it for you. Here come the rations. Come over, and I'll see you get a bite to eat. Then off on your business—and all success to you!"

Then and there, harrassed and all but knocked out, Bob resolved that to his last day of life he would always have a good word to say for the Regular Army.

By the time that he had finished breakfast—a bite of tinned meat and two hardtack, Bob Bragg set out on his vitally important mission.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT "LITTLE FUNSTON" DID.

"Halt, younker! What are you doing here?"

It was the challenge of a soldier, not two blocks from where our hero had started.

"Traveling on business, on a pass," Bob replied, quickly.

"Don't believe it."

"Here's the pass, then."

The sentry didn't look at it. He saw that there was a paper—that was all.

"Go on, then," he grumbled.

"Where'll I find the nearest fire chief?" Bob ventured.

"Where's the fire?"

"I want to find a man who is working for him."

"What for?"

"The business that I'm on is with that man."

"Go ahead and find the nearest fire chief, then."

Not all soldiers were as kind as some that our hero had met.

He trudged on, but it was not long before he came to a block in which fire was still raging.

"Here! Get back! No sightseers wanted!" yelled a sentry at the outer edge of the fire lines.

"But I am traveling with—under written orders," finished Bob, desperately, holding up the slip on which his pass was written.

"Get on in, then," replied the sentry, too tired, and with eyes aching too much for reading.

Within the fire lines an engineer stood beside a fire engine that was useless from the lack of water.

"Excuse me, sir," begged Bob, "but have you a man working with this outfit—a man who has a crescent-shaped scar on one cheek?"

"Why, we did have, yesterday," replied the engineer.

"Carrying buckets for water?"

"Part of the time."

"Where is he to-day?"

"Dunno. Hasn't showed up. Skipped or shot, most likely."

Scar-face gotten away!

Bob's heart sank as he realized that again the search had become city-wide.

He prowled about for a while, scanning the fire fighters.

But his enemy was not among them.

"I'll never find him!" groaned the boy. "That fellow is under the especial protection of Old Nick!"

Left to wonder what he should do next, Bob remembered the women folks who depended upon his protection and services.

"Poor old Lena, and pretty Nan!" he muttered. "And Elsie—perhaps without enough to eat! I've got to find 'em—that's a plain duty."

Wearily he turned his steps toward Market street.

No longer were the throngs there. The great thoroughfare, save for soldiers and a few toiling gangs of workers, seemed deserted.

It seemed a distance of miles, but Bob, his feet throbbing with the pain of walking, toiled on until he finally reached that vacant lot.

Vacant, indeed! There was not a soul there now!

He toiled on toward the stable that had been used as a hospital.

There were no patients here now. The building was being used as a relief station for distributing rations and old clothing.

"What's become of all the people?" he inquired of a sentry.

"Looking for friends?"

"Yes."

"You'll find 'em camping in Golden Gate Park, most

likely. All who could walk out toted out on foot. The rest were carried out in autos and wagons."

Bob turned away. There was no use in asking more questions.

Chug! chug! An auto was preparing to leave the depot.

"Any papers to go to General Funston?" called out the sergeant at the speed lever.

The query was addressed to an Army captain, the officer in charge here. Bob sprang eagerly forward.

"Oh, captain, is there to be a seat to spare in that auto?" sore-footed Bob gasped.

"Why, boy?"

"I'm bound for General Funston, with papers of my own."

"You are, eh?" demanded the captain, curiously. "What kind of papers?"

"This," Bob panted, almost hopelessly; but he thrust Lieutenant Pelham's note into the officer's hands.

"Pelham, eh?" mused the captain. "And Pelham says your business is important. It must be so, then. I've a high opinion of Pelham. You see, lad, the lieutenant happens to be my son."

His head almost in a whirl, Bragg found himself being pushed into the seat beside the sergeant.

Whizz! He was whirling off through the city now, covering block after block at the speed of steam, and without an ounce of pressure against his sore, boil-like feet.

"Take this boy direct to the general's headquarters," he had heard Captain Pelham order.

With the breeze in his face, and curled back in his seat, Bob, under the soothing motion, fell sound asleep.

He knew no more until the sergeant roused him roughly.

"If you want the general, here's his headquarters."

Bob awoke, drowsily, to find that the auto had stopped before one of the administration buildings out at the Presidio, the great military reservation that overlooks the Golden Gate.

"Here, sentry, help this boy out—he's got boils on his feet and business with General Funston," called the sergeant, drily.

A good-natured soldier lifted Bob from the auto to the ground, took a brief look at Lieutenant Pelham's note, and pointed to the doorway of the administration building.

"Go in there. Maybe the general can see you—bye and bye."

It was to be "bye and bye," surely enough, if at all, as Bob quickly discovered, after he had stepped into the corridor of the building.

He was directed into an ante-room, where he handed his note to a boyish-looking young lieutenant.

"You'll be lucky to see the general," announced the lieutenant, nodding his head toward scores of citizens who were in the room on the same kind of business. "It'll be hours, anyway, lad. But I'll do my best for you, for I'm a friend of Pelham's. See here, since you've got such a long wait, come into the next room."

In that next room, which was deserted, the lieutenant pointed to a long, cushioned settee.

"You look worn out, lad. Curl up on one of those cushions, and go to sleep. I'll see that you're called."

"How good you are!" murmured the boy, gratefully.

"Oh, that's all right," nodded the young officer. "Always glad to look out for Pelham's friends."

Our hero was just beginning to get a taste of the good it does one to have "a friend at court."

Snore! He was sound asleep, at once—dead to fatigue for the time being, too exhausted even to dream.

He must have slept for hours, for the light in the room was growing dim when the boyish-looking lieutenant shook him.

"Come on, lad, hurry up! General Funston has two minutes only to give you!"

Bob stumbled to his feet somehow, and followed painfully in the wake of the lieutenant.

The latter pushed open a swinging door, and our hero stood in the presence of the great man.

Great? In stature General Frederick Funston is so almost tiny that he is known in the army as "Little Funston."

"What can I do for you, Bragg?" called a brisk but kindly voice. "Be quick, please."

General Funston was but a trifle over five feet in height, a slight, wiry-looking man, with piercing dark eyes.

He was the hero of a hundred reckless exploits in the Philippines.

It was Funston who, on a raft, had crossed the Bagbag River with scarcely a score of soldiers with him, and in the face of a Filipino army corps. Yet he had held the enemy back long enough to enable a few regiments of American troops to cross the river to his support.

It was Funston who had daringly captured Aguinaldo, the head of the Filipino insurrection.

He had played the hero so often, in fact, that it wearied the head of anyone but a historian to keep track of his feats.

Quick, quiet, active, capable, he was the ideal army man to have command of the military forces in San Francisco at such a time.

"You're limping. Take that chair," said Little Funston, quickly. "Now then!"

As hurriedly as he could, Bob recounted his mission in San Francisco, and his adventures with Scar-face.

While the boy talked the general made a few notes.

"Very good," said Little Funston, swiftly. "As soon as possible I'll send out an order to look for the fellow and put him under arrest."

"And that precious paper?" begged the boy.

"That will be taken from him at once, if found. Is that all?"

"Yes, general. And thank you a thousand times!"

"If your man has fled from the city," went on the general, "it's very likely that he has turned up in one of the camps in the park. Suppose you go there. Hang about

the depots where they give out the food, and you may locate your man. If you do, hand this order to the nearest soldier or officer, and have the rascal nabbed and searched."

General Funston wrote like lightning, pressing the finished paper in the boy's hand.

"And here's a pass that may save you from much trouble," filling out and signing a card, which he also gave the boy.

He touched a bell, a sergeant entering.

"Sergeant, tell Mr. Waters that I want to see him."

The boyish-looking lieutenant promptly appeared.

"Lieutenant Waters, this boy wants to get to the park. His feet are in such condition that it'd take him a week to walk there. See to it that he has a ride on one of the wagons headed that way."

Bob tried to utter his thanks, but Little Funston cut him short with a smile and a grip of the hand.

Lieutenant Waters made it his own business to see that Bob had a seat on one of the quartermaster wagons headed for the Golden Gate Park.

More than that, the young officer added a word to the driver that made the latter more attentive.

"Pile in on that heap of blankets, and go to sleep, if you want to," grinned the driver.

"I'm doing nothing but sleep to-day," replied Bob.

"Look as if you needed it."

His mind vastly more easy than it had been at any time since the earthquake, Bob again fell asleep, soothed by the mild jolting of the wagon.

It was after dark when they hauled up at one of the supply stations in the park.

This station consisted of nothing more than a small army tent, in which two officers were busy.

The supplies, of blankets and food, were heaped up outside, while a dozen sentries kept back the mob clamoring for supplies of every kind.

"Take one of the blankets with you, younker," advised the driver, as Bob rose stiffly.

After sleeping outdoors for two nights, Bragg knew the value of a blanket. He gratefully accepted.

A little further away three officers were superintending the distribution of food.

By showing the pass from Little Funston the boy secured something to eat at once.

"Can I have a little more for friends?" asked the boy, eagerly.

"Yes."

Two tins of meat and a package of hardtack were added to his little store.

Such was the influence of the pass from the general.

"I'll wait until they stop giving out the food. Then I'll try to find Lena and Nan and Elsie," murmured the boy.

Still under the protection of the pass, he dropped his blanket to the ground and sat on it, watching those who came up in the line for food.

"It'd be like a dropping from heaven if Scar-face showed up now," he quivered, as he watched.

Within half an hour Scar-face did show up, though not as Bob had hoped.

The rascal, on the edge of the line, saw his young enemy first.

"That confounded cub again!" gasped the rascal, starting back. "He seems sure to find me."

Yet, had Bob looked directly at him, he might not have recognized his enemy.

For Scar-face, as if to defy possible detection, had bound a cloth bandage about his face, nearly concealing his features.

To make the bandage seem more genuine, it had been plentifully streaked with blood, procured from some source known only to the rascal in question.

Hungry, Scar-face fell away from the line.

Yet he manoeuvred around and in behind our hero.

"It may be life for me to shadow that kid and see what he's up to," mumbled Scar-face.

Another hour Bob remained there on his blanket, carefully scanning all the masculine faces that came up under the flickering light of the torches.

"This ends the food distribution to-night!" bellowed one of the officers. "Very sorry, friends, but we've given out the last supplies."

Cries of disappointment rose from hundreds of men, women and children.

Yet there was no help for it. Hundreds, thousands more, must be turned away in the same fashion at the other relief stations in the great Golden Gate Park, where now more than half the population of San Francisco was camped.

"Poor things!" muttered Bob, his heart aching at sight of the pinched, hungry faces. "They'd mob me, I suppose, if they knew the stuff I've got tucked away under this blanket."

Then, suddenly, he started to his feet.

His glance had fallen on one white-faced girl in that disappointed, turned-away throng.

"Nan!" he called, joyously.

Miss Rivers saw him, and came hastening over.

"Oh, how glad I am to see you!" she cried.

"And I to see you!" echoed Bob. "I meant to look for you as soon as this distribution stopped. I couldn't get to you sooner. I was——"

"Oh, Lena said you had a good reason of some sort for being away from us," Nan interrupted, sympathetically.

"How have you fared?"

"All right, except for food. We haven't been able to eat since we got out here yesterday."

"Whisper!" murmured Bob, joyously. "Under my blanket I've food enough!"

"Look out!" cried Nan, suddenly.

Turning as swiftly as he could, Bob caught a poor fellow in the act of trying to snatch the blanket.

As the man did so, the hidden food was exposed.

With an eager cry the fellow pounced upon it.

"Let go!" cried Bob, "or I'll call a sentry!"

"But I'm hungry!" faltered the fellow.

"Be a man, then, and bear it like a man! Don't rob women of their little bite!"

"Let him have a little," urged Nan, in a whisper, though she stared eagerly at the tins and the hardtack.

"No," Bob contradicted. "A man ought to be able to stand hunger better than women. Get out, my friend!"

With so many sentries about the hungry man slunk away.

"Come," murmured Bob, as he gathered up the food, wrapped in the blanket, "take me to your sister."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BITTER CUP.

Though the army had given up everything in the shape of a tent that could be spared, and though rough shanties had been built of such timbers as could be carted out of the ruined city, thousands were still destitute of shelter in Golden Gate Park.

Nan and Lena had fared well, however.

The girl led our hero up to one of the tiny shelter tents—"pup-houses" the soldiers called them, which the young women had been fortunate enough to have assigned to them.

It was a tiny tent indeed, not more than two and a half feet high and just six feet long.

Under such a tent two soldiers are expected to sleep when in the field.

Now it was obliged to do for Lena, her sister and the child.

Lena Rivers lay just inside the tent, while Elsie played listlessly outside.

"Oh, here's Uncle Bob!" cried the child, suddenly, darting forward. Uncle Bob, you got something for me to eat?"

"Yes," whispered the boy, bending over to kiss the child, "but don't make a noise about it, or we'll have a hungry mob down on us!"

But Elsie, ignoring the caution, sprang under the little canvas shelter, crying:

"Oh, mamma, here's Uncle Bob, and he's got something to eat!"

Lena raised her head slowly as Bob thrust his head under the canvas.

Then, seeing that it was really he, she bent forward and kissed him plumply.

"I knew you'd get to us, Bob, as soon as you could!" she cried.

"And I've had the luck to be kissed by two-thirds of the family," laughed the boy, sending a roguish look at Nan.

"I'm not going to be a bit stingy, then," declared the girl, though she flushed rosily. "For the honor of the Rivers family, you understand."

She lowered her cheek for the kneeling boy to salute.

"Look at this, Lena!" glowed the happy boy, unrolling the blanket. "Elsie, pet, do be still!" he whispered, anx-

iously. "If you tell others we've got food, someone will come here and take it away from us!"

That prospect stopped the child's tongue instantly.

"What a lot!" whispered Lena, eyeing the food hungrily. "And you can eat with us, Bob."

"Why, I've eaten already," he replied, huskily. He had saved his own portion to eat with them.

But he suddenly remembered his advice to the hungry fellow to be a man and save all food for women and children.

"I can take my own advice, I reckon," he muttered to himself.

"Have you really and honestly eaten, Bob?" Nan demanded, suspiciously.

"Really and honestly," lied Bob, barefacedly, and, somehow, he felt better and more manly for telling such a lie.

This tent was up close to a line of trees.

There were no other tents very near, so that the woman, the girl and the child were able to come out in the open to eat their meal silently.

"And here's a blanket to keep you warm to-night," Bob offered, proudly.

"Oh, but you'll need that," Lena objected.

"I need it?" grunted Bob. "Why, it seems as if I had been sleeping outdoors without a blanket for years. I'm used to it, and toughened to it. No luxuries for me, thank you."

"I wish we could make room for you in that tiny little tent, but we can't," sighed Lena. "Therefore, we simply won't take that blanket from you."

"It was awfully cold last night," shivered Elsie.

"Of course it was, little one," cried Bob. "And to-night you simply shall have the blanket over you."

"Elsie!" cried her mother, reproachfully.

"Don't scold the child, Lena. She's young enough to tell the honest truth—that's all that ails her. And, of course, you'll have the blanket, and, of course, I'll sleep on the ground just outside the tent."

Somehow, they all felt thankful that night. They had been through so much, and now seemed nearer the end of their troubles.

Even the thought of Scar-face didn't bother the boy as much as it might have done. When General Funston's order of arrest went the rounds, it seemed almost certain that the soldiers must come across the man and seize him.

"We were lonely last night, as well as hungry," said Lena, when the three had eaten, and some food had been put away for the morning. "Now, it seems as if we had all our little family together once more. For, you see, Bob, we can't help looking on you as one of the family."

"I'd like to be, all right," smiled the boy.

Daringly, he put his hand out and closed it over one of Nan's hands.

She did not attempt to draw hers away.

Trouble had made them comrades—and when Nan was a friend she was a friend all the way through.

Yet she flushed again when she caught Bob's eager gaze turned on her face.

"Whew!" muttered the boy, suddenly. "When I find myself with decent women again, I begin to realize how dirty and ragged I am."

"We're no better off," laughed Nan. "And even the opening of laundries wouldn't help us any. Nan didn't have time to think of her money the morning of the earthquake. I had a few dollars, but we spent that on a wagon to bring us out here."

"I've got four or five dollars," confessed the boy, "but that wouldn't buy us much of anything now. Besides that, I've got what's left of my deposit in the Excelsior Savings Bank."

"Probably the bank is in ruins," hinted Lena.

"Yes; I reckon we're broke together. It's fashionable to be broke and hungry in 'Frisco just now," Bob nodded. "But I don't believe we'll be hungry any longer. I have a pass from General Funston that secured this food for us to-night. I'll try to work it again to-morrow."

People from a little camp group two or three hundred yards away were trying to revive their spirits by singing.

"Can't you sing something, girls?" Bragg hinted. "Just to show that we're not wholly in the dumps?"

Nan began to sing, Lena joining in.

"I feel a heap better than homeless to-night," the boy sighed, contentedly.

Then, at Nan's request, he fell to telling them what had befallen him in the city of desolation.

"But it's ten o'clock—late enough for you poor people to be getting your sleep," he wound up, after a glance at his watch. "To bed, you!" he added, with a smiling air of proprietorship. "Now, I think I'd sleep very restfully if you'd grant a poor fellow a last favor for the night!"

"What is it?" asked Nan, quickly.

"Why, a sort of family good-night kiss all around," Bob hinted.

It was Nan, and Nan alone, that the young rascal really wanted to kiss.

But without waiting for permission, he kissed Elsie, who remembered "Uncle Bob" with a right good smack.

Then Lena presented her face.

But Nan he kissed twice, quickly, before she had time to draw away from the second salute.

"Good-night, all!" said Bob, softly, after passing the blanket in.

He stretched himself on the ground, in the open air.

It was cold. He felt chilled to the bone; but, between Funston's friendliness and Nan's sweetness, he was beginning to feel that even such a desolate human wilderness as San Francisco was not the worst spot on earth.

"I can understand why I've always been so fond of Lena," he reflected, at last. "It's because she'd make the jolliest sister-in-law going. And Elsie has begun to call me 'Uncle Bob.' Why, I'd be her uncle, really, if—"

At that point he drifted off into slumber.

But Nan was not asleep. Her thoughts, as she lay awake, were about the boy who had been so good to them.

The story of his troubles with Scar-face had left a vivid impress on her mind.

So, as she lay there awake, she thrust her head out beyond the tent, her wide-open eyes taking in the slumbering form of Bob Bragg.

At some time late in the night she thought she heard stealthy steps.

"Can it be that wretch, trying to kill our friend, as he did last night?" she asked herself, in sudden fright.

She lay there, very still, but thoroughly aroused and watchful.

As she waited she saw a prowling figure steal into dim view, coming slowly nearer the tent.

She could make out nothing beyond the fact that the prowler was a man.

"Get away, you wretch!" Nan screamed, loudly. "Sentry! Help! Help!"

The prowling figure faded into the darkness as Bob sat up.

A soldier could be heard coming their way on the run.

"What's up?" demanded Bob.

"I think your enemy was trying to creep up," quivered Nan. "I saw someone, anyway."

"It might be," thought Bob, swiftly. "The rascal might have seen me near the supply station to-night. He may have trailed me here."

The sentry came rushing up, demanding an explanation.

Nan told what she had seen. Bob added his own story.

"Hain't heard nothing about Little Funston's order yet," grunted the soldier. "But I'll take a chance, if I find your Scar-face. I'll ask the corporal to let me extend my post nearer this way, too."

With that the soldier was gone.

But presently they saw the sentry patrolling nearer to them than he had done before.

"How did you come to be awake?" Bob asked the girl, softly, for Lena and Elsie had slept on through the excitement.

"I wasn't drowsy, I slept so much through the day, when I was hungry," Nan answered. "When I saw that figure I couldn't help remembering about Scar-face, and so I couldn't help crying out."

"I'm mighty glad you did," Bragg acknowledged, "for I more than half believe it really was that scoundrel."

"You can go to sleep again," Nan hinted. "I'm not a bit sleepy myself."

"Neither am I," Bob returned.

"Then we can talk a little, to kill the time."

So Bob moved closer to the tent, and once again he got hold of one of the girl's hands.

"You don't mind, do you?" he asked.

"Not if it gives you any comfort," she answered, redenning a trifle.

"Why," proclaimed cheeky Bragg, "it sorter makes a

lonesome fellow feel as if he had someone belonging to him a little bit."

So Nan let her hand rest in his,

Thus they whiled away the time until daylight.

But now a new torment came upon the homeless thousands.

Rain began to fall heavily.

"Wake up, Lena!" commanded her sister.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Rivers asked, opening her eyes.

"It's raining, and we've got to manage to sit up so that we can let Bob in here with us, out of the wet."

This they managed, by sitting very close together, and without disturbing Elsie, who slept on.

Then, somehow—he didn't quite realize how he accomplished it, but he went at it craftily enough—Bob Bragg got one arm around Nan's waist.

He began by resting one hand near the small of her shapely back as they sat huddled close together.

By degrees he got that arm a little closer and a little closer, until it rested comfortably and happily around her trim little waist.

And Nan, acting on the notion that if it made his situation any more pleasant for the time being, it didn't harm anyone else, didn't show any displeasure.

By seven o'clock, however, Bob gave up this delightfully pleasant occupation to sally forth to the supply station.

More food was being handed out. By the aid of Little Funston's pass he was able to get himself promptly served without standing in line.

Happy, he returned to the little shelter tent.

Crowded in as they were, they were, nevertheless, happy—Bob especially so, since he ate with the help of one hand, the other being pleasantly busy at Nan's waist.

It was raining hard now.

"I'm awfully thirsty!" sighed Elsie.

"Why can't we set these tins out to catch water?" Lena suggested.

But Bragg, wide awake to his new responsibilities as temporary head of an interesting family, got outside of the tent and upon his feet.

"I've been an idiot," he muttered. "I saw some buckets down at the supply station. I'll rustle one of those, if the pass still holds good, and then I'll do my best to strike water with it."

Off through the rain he hurried, not minding the drenching or the chilling, so long as he could bring more comfort to his "family."

The bucket he obtained without difficulty, the pass still proving to be a power. He was directed, also, where to find a well, less than a quarter of a mile away.

"Why, I almost feel kindly toward Scar-face now," muttered the boy. "His rascality has put me in a great position to help my family."

"Want any cups?" hailed a soldier, beckoning our hero, and pointing to two or three hundred tin cups in a big packing case.

"Four, if I can have 'em," proposed Bob.

"Take 'em."

"Scar-face, you're a treasure in disguise!" chuckled the youngster.

Then he limped off, though not so badly as the day before, in quest of the well.

He found it, surrounded by a throng.

For some minutes Bob waited his turn.

Then a soldier spoke to him.

"You'll have to pass your bucket up. We don't allow you folks close to the water."

"Do I get the bucket back, all right?" Bragg cautiously inquired.

"If you have luck."

"If I don't, I'll flash the pass," murmured the boy.

He passed over the bucket. It passed up the line to the well.

Working there, dipping out water, was a man who had been pressed into service.

It was Scar-face, for whom, even now, soldiers were alertly on the watch.

But the rascal, with his face bound up as if suffering from a severe attack of the mumps, was no longer recognizable.

Bob may have glanced at the fellow, but did not know him.

No so with Scar-face, however.

He started, as he saw Bob's bucket handed over to the soldier.

"That troublesome kid again," he muttered. "He'll follow me up until I finish him."

Watching the bucket closely as it passed from hand to hand along the line, Scar-face pounced upon it.

Hidden in his left hand was a tiny vial of prussic acid, one of the deadliest of poisons, the result of an undetected and unpunished raid in a toppling drug store the day of the earthquake.

With the bucket, Scar-face bent over into the well. At the same time he emptied the vial into the pail.

Up came the bucket, full of water. Recklessly, Scar-face rinsed his left hand in the fluid until he saw that the acid had dissolved.

Then down the line he started the deadly stuff.

"Prussic acid kills within a few seconds!" quavered the wretch, "and there's stuff enough in that bucket to make a neighborhood drop dead!"

Down the line came the bucket. Bob kept his gaze fast on it. He had not seen the little transaction at the well.

"Mine!" he claimed, promptly, and the soldier, remembering him, handed him the pail of deadly poisonous water.

Back to the shelter tent hurried Bob.

Nan was looking for his approach, and hailed him with a bright smile.

"The pass worked again, all right," he cried, jubilantly.

Setting down the bucket, he dipped out a cupful and passed it to Elsie.

"Wait, child," commanded her mother. "Wait until all are served, then we'll drink a toast together in this cool, delicious water."

Nan was served, and then Lena. Bob stood up with his cupful just beyond the tent door.

"Now, the toast!" he cried, gaily.

"May all our troubles end as easily as this thirst is quenched," proposed Lena Rivers.

Laughing, they raised their cups to drink.

CHAPTER IX.

WITH THE LOOTERS.

"Look at that poor dog!" broke in Elsie, with childish sympathy.

A homeless cur, prowling near the door, tried to steal up to the bucket.

"Get out of that!" ordered Bob, brandishing his free hand. "Wait your turn, sir, and we'll serve you."

"He's thirsty," said Elsie, plaintively.

"And hungry, too, I guess," Bob nodded. "Dogs don't get much attention these days."

"He ought to have a drink of water, if he's suffering for it," broke in Lena, gently. "We know, ourselves, how it feels to be thirsty."

"And we're forgetting our thirst, at that!" clicked Bragg, raising his cup again.

"Don't!" spoke Lena, almost sharply. "Not until we've placed some for the dog, too!"

"Can't the dog wait just ten seconds?" asked Bob, holding the cup to his lips.

"It doesn't seem right, or humane," suggested Nan.

So Bob, anxious above all things, to stand well with his "family," set his cup on the ground, just inside the tent.

Then, taking up one of the empty meat tins, he dipped it up half full of water.

"Come on, Ki-yi!" he coaxed, setting the tin on the ground.

The thirsty animal needed no urging.

It sidled up to the tin, thrusting in its parched tongue and drinking greedily.

Then, wagging its tail, the homeless animal looked up at Bob as much as to say:

"Can't you feed me, too?"

"Come on, now, and down our toast," suggested Bob Bragg.

"Look at that dog—how funny it acts!" interposed Elsie.

The brute had begun to stagger. Of a sudden it fell over, kicking feebly, and then lay still.

"Whew!" whistled Bob. "That's the first time I ever knew a few spoonfuls of water to kill."

"Maybe there's a reason," spoke Nan.

"To our toast, anyway," urged Lena, raising her cup once more.

"Don't!" thundered Bob, suddenly. "Stop!"

They lowered their cups, regarding him curiously.

"I'm not thoroughly satisfied about this," quaked Bob. "The sudden collapse of that dog looks suspicious. What if there's something the matter with this water? Don't!" he cried, darting forward and snatching Elsie's cup just in time to stop the child from sipping.

He tossed cup and contents outside on the ground.

"Don't touch this water until we know," he begged.

Another dog, attracted by the sight of the bucket, was hovering near.

"Come here, Ki-yi!" coaxed the boy, holding out his cup temptingly.

Trusting, eagerly, the second dog approached.

The brute drank eagerly.

"Watch him!" quivered Bragg.

Within a few moments dog number two began to stagger, then fell.

"That settles it!" faltered Bob, his face white as chalk.

"We don't dare drink this water. It must be poisoned!"

"But who could have done it?" cried Lena, tremulously.

"His life won't be worth a nickel, if I find out!" throbbed the boy. "Wait! I'm off for the spring!"

Snatching up the bucket and his own cup, he ran back as fast as his legs would carry him.

Up to the same soldier who had served him before he ran.

"See here," the boy whispered, quivering, "someone poisoned this water!"

"Gwan!" mocked the soldier.

"Call that dog over there, and give him a drink. Then you'll see."

"Here, doggy!" hailed Bob, dipping out a cupful of water.

Cautiously, the third dog approached, until sure that the water really was meant for it. Then the animal drank, greedily enough.

"Now watch!" Bob uttered, grimly.

Wagging its tail, the dog looked up as if begging for more thirst quencher.

But in a few seconds more the animal keeled over.

"Jerusha!" gasped the soldier.

"Ready to believe me now?"

The soldier did not stop to answer. Instead, he bolted to the well, demanding:

"All the fellows here who've been working here?"

"All but one," replied the corporal in charge. "He just got excused on account of feeling sick."

"Then you'd better get him quick, corporal. That missing chap must be the one who's poisoned the water."

"What's that, man?"

"Come back and look at a dog that dropped dead after one drink!"

The corporal hurriedly complied, Bob excitedly supplying details.

Then four or five soldiers were sent scurrying off in different directions.

Bob waited until they came back to report failure.

In the meantime he had asked the corporal whether the

missing man had borne a moon-shaped scar on his left cheek.

"Couldn't say," replied the corporal. "He had his head all bandaged up, as I remember."

"He's the man you want, just the same," quivered the boy.

"We'll do our best to find him," promised the corporal, wearily.

Another soldier came up with a vial he had just picked up.

On the label was printed in plain letters:

"Prussic acid!"

"Whew!" gasped the corporal, and promptly sent one of his men for the officer of the day.

The latter came, a young lieutenant. He listened to all our hero had to say, then ordered his men to stop giving out water from this well for the present.

"If that scoundrel can be found in the whole city, he shall be found and shot full of holes!" promised the lieutenant.

Bob went back to the tent, full of gloomy thoughts.

Later on, he obtained another bucket, more cups, and water from another well.

But this fluid was thoroughly tested on four different straying dogs before he would allow his "family" to try the water.

Supper that night made all hands feel a little more cheerful.

It had stopped raining, too, and after dark Bob and Nan strolled, hand in hand, not far from the tent.

"If it was Scar-face who poisoned that water," predicted Bragg, "I don't believe we need look for a visit from him to-night."

"Why?" Nan asked.

"Because he'll know better than to trust himself near the soldiers in this part of the park."

Nevertheless, after Bob had seen Nan back to the tent, and she had promised to remain awake for a while on guard, he stole off into the darkness.

He was intent on prowling about and watching, to see if Scar-face would have the nerve to venture.

But, though he strolled about for an hour, often challenged by sentries, our hero got no glimpse of the human cur he sought.

"Wonder if anybody's camping, or lurking over among those trees?" pondered the boy, eyeing a belt of timber.

He approached, cautiously, stealthily, thinking that the shade of these trees would furnish an ideal place for the skulkers who did not dare face honest people openly.

Yet, after looking, he was about to turn away again, when he heard a low voice ask:

"Sure the money's there?"

"Sure?" replied another voice. "Why, of course. The vault hasn't been opened yet. If I hadn't got down among the cinders, I wouldn't have known that the vault was cracked at the bottom, either. Boys, with a crowbar we can force our way right into that vault; and the Electric

is a rich bank, at that. There may be hundreds of thousands of dollars in that vault."

"The soldiers wouldn't do a thing to us, if they caught us," objected still another voice.

"Oh, well, if you're afraid, you needn't go into it. But there's no guard at the bank yet. To-morrow we can slip back into town in the daylight. At night, one of the crowd can talk to the nearest sentry, while the rest of us slip in under the vault. A little work, and, boys, we'll sure see more money than we believed there was in the world. Remember, the Electric Bank holds the funds of some of the big trusts."

Bob had stopped in the black darkness, leaning against one of the big trees.

He could not see how many men there were in there, but he judged that there must be at least seven or eight.

And they were plotting to rob the cracked vault of one of the unguarded banks.

"Sure shooting, if they're caught!" grimaced the eavesdropper. "Gracious! I hope Scar-face is in that crowd. For caught they'll be! I'll get word of this to General Funston, and I miss my guess if the little general doesn't set a soldier trap for them."

"It looks safe," spoke up another of the gang beyond.

"It's worth the try, anyway," declared the first speaker. "I'd sooner be killed than stay a poor man with all that wealth handy. Of course, if any of you don't like the risk, all you've got to do is to keep your mouths shut and let the loot go to nervier men."

"Oh, I'm in for the risk," announced one of the former objectors.

"And I."

"Me, too."

"I reckon you'll all be in for it," laughed the proposer. "Well, in the morning we'll pike toward town. Now we might as well get a sleep, for we won't get much sleep to-morrow night, if we keep our nerve."

"Sleep to-morrow night?" quivered Bob Bragg. "That's just what you all will get, if the soldiers catch you at the vault."

Not daring to move, as yet, the boy held his breath, waiting for the chance to slide away, undetected.

Someone moved near him, rustlingly.

Then a man loomed up through the blackness, looking at the boy wildly.

Grip! In a twinkling Bob Bragg was clutched by the throat.

It was too late to cry out.

"Boys!" whispered Bob's captor, hoarsely.

There was a rush to the spot.

"Who's the kid?"

"What's he doing here?"

"Listening to our plans."

"The little sneak!"

"Choke the life out of him!"

Bob was in the grasp of at least three of the gang by this time.

"Bring him over and put him down on the ground," ordered the leader, in a shaking voice. "We'll finish him with all hands looking on to make sure that the job is well done."

Bob, his throat still gripped in that deadly strangle-hold that was making his senses reel, was borne further in among the trees.

"It's only a kid," growled one of the men, as Bob was laid down on the ground.

"Well, he's done for," announced another. "See, he ain't squirming a bit now!"

"We've got to bury him, though, before daylight."

"That's sure enough," nodded the man who had caught and choked our hero.

"Make a sure job of him, before you talk about burying," advised another of the scoundrels.

"Plant him, and he won't come up!" gruffed the lookout who had caught the boy.

"That's right. He ain't breathing."

"Whee! but that was a lucky escape for us!"

"Yep; if he had told the authorities it would have been bullets for the eight of us."

"He may have friends lurking about here, fellows."

The hint was enough to send five of the eight scurrying off in different directions.

'Possum Bob!

He had been lying still, trying not to breathe, as the only hope he saw for life.

Now, cautiously, he opened one of his eyes ever so little.

But he saw enough to make sure that the three men who still lingered near him were listening and watching, paying no heed to him.

Glide! Bob slipped off a bit, then up on his feet and started to run.

"Glory! There's the kid piking from us!" gasped one of the crooks.

"Nail him! Don't let him get away alive!"

Bob Bragg had thought he had bruised and sore feet.

But now, as he found himself fairly racing away for his life, he amazed himself by the speed that he could make.

From all directions he saw dark figures racing to head him off.

"Sentry! Help! help! Murder!"

The pursuers wavered.

In those days the call for the sentry was no joke, when the arrival of one was half sure to be followed by instant shooting.

So Bob shouted again as he scooted.

There was a clear field before him now, but he did not slacken up much until he met two soldiers and a corporal hurrying up.

"What's the row, kid?"

"Gang of fellows back there plotting to rob the Electric Bank. They say the vault is cracked on the bottom."

"Stay here and watch the kid," grunted the corporal to one of his men.

The other two dashed off in the direction from which Bragg had run.

They were back in a few minutes, empty handed.

"Nothing over there in the timber except the remains of a squatter camp," broke in the corporal.

"You didn't expect they'd stay for you?" mocked Bob.

"See here, boy, are you giving this thing straight?" asked the corporal, suspiciously.

"As straight as I know how," our hero declared. "They caught me listening and started to do me up. I got away by playing 'possum, and hollering for you fellows."

Then, as by an inspiration, Bragg produced Little Funtson's pass.

"I guess you must be straight goods to get that pass," nodded the corporal. "Come along—the officer of the day for us!"

Within five minutes Bob was explaining quickly to a lieutenant what had happened.

The patrol was sent out to scout the neighborhood for the gang, though the boy's descriptions were not good enough to be of much help.

"This will be a dangerous night for you, too," mused the lieutenant, "in case any of that gang have stayed behind. Where are you sleeping?"

Bob pointed to where the Rivers tent was.

The lieutenant walked over with him, instructing the nearest sentry to keep alert watch over Bob's safety.

CHAPTER X.

"WITH THE GOODS ON."

Bob had not lain down very long when he was again aroused.

This time the lieutenant brought Major Carr, field officer of the day.

"We haven't caught any of the gang," announced the lieutenant. "They have melted. But Major Carr wants to ask you a few questions."

First of all, the major examined the pass. That seemed to establish the boy's standing.

Then he asked many questions, only a few of which our hero was able to answer.

"Well, let them try to get at the bank," uttered the major, grimly. "Forewarned is forearmed."

Which meant that military headquarters would be notified, and that the guard near the bank would be greatly increased and have the strictest orders to keep constantly alert.

"And you'll be a marked man in this camp, too," mused the major. "If these are really desperate criminals, I'm afraid they'll do their best to see your ghost laid. Lieutenant, see that the orders are very strict about protecting young Bragg."

The sentry's beat was brought nearer.

Bob lay down, therefore, for his sleep, with a feeling of rather good security against harm by night.

He was awake in the morning, his feet a good deal rested.

It not having rained through the night, he felt vastly better all around.

There was news in the camps that morning that made thousands of people restless.

Several of the 'Frisco banks, the Excelsior among them, were to reopen and pay out such money as depositors might need.

"There'll be a rush, too, that'll clean out all of a bank's ready cash," observed one man.

"Gracious!" Bob's heart gave a thump.

"If the rush cleans out the Excelsior's handy cash, I may be left stranded in California indefinitely," he muttered, uneasily.

This he explained to Lena and to Nan.

"If you can get into town, you'd better hurry and get your money, if you can," they both advised.

"But how will you get along?"

"Oh, you've gotten us food enough for the day," Lena smiled.

"But at night—if I don't get back?"

"There'll be the sentry," Nan laughed. "I'm getting so I'm not a bit afraid of anything when a scream will bring up a friend with a loaded gun."

"But look out for yourself, my dear boy," begged Mrs. Rivers. "What I'm most afraid of is that some of last night's gang will try to follow you and get their revenge."

"It'd be a risky business for 'em, in broad daylight," Bob murmured. "Let a man show fight in these days, and the chances are ten to one that he'll be shot on general principles, for being a tough character."

"Come back as soon as you can, Uncle Bob!" called Elsie.

He kissed the child, then trudged off sturdily.

There was still just a trifle of pain and swelling left in his feet, but he preferred to forget it.

It was a walk of miles—long and weary miles, and there would have been much to look at among the ruined buildings and the homeless but cheerful throngs, had it not been for the one purpose that was strong in the boy's breast.

Once he got a lift for three miles on a slow-moving quartermaster's wagon. The pass did that.

But others followed him tirelessly on foot.

Since he had started away from the camp three men had made it their task not to lose sight of him.

"He's the spy that gave us away!" they told each other, vengefully. "We'll get him with the goods on!"

"It'll teach meddlers to be careful about what they snoop into," growled another of the trio.

It was not far from Market street where Bob got down from the quartermaster's wagon.

Soldiers still patrolled the streets busily, though, from the men being worn out by day and night work, the sentries were further apart, save at important centers.

It was a walk of a few blocks up Market street for the boy.

Still the three men dogged him tirelessly.

Had he caught sight of them he would hardly have known them.

But, quite unsuspecting, he kept on until he halted to look, smiling, at a queer little six-by-nine shanty that had been erected on one lot over a pile of ashes.

"At home," was the legend painted on a wide strip of cloth and hung over the narrow doorway.

Bump! As Bob stood for an instant, looking, a fellow thumped into him.

"Certainly, I excuse you," smiled Bob, good-naturedly, as he turned.

"Aw, shut up!" came back the surly reply from the rough-looking man who had bumped him.

"Oh, all right," Bob nodded, smilingly.

"Say, getting fresh, are you?" snarled the man.

Bob eyed him in surprise.

"What ails you, man?"

"I'll show you!"

But suddenly the boy started.

He knew his man now—one of last night's crowd.

Like a flash, our hero turned to run.

But the other two roughs had closed in.

They hemmed him, then jumped on him.

Biff! Thump! Pound!

Down went Bragg, and knew no more.

"Cut it! Sentry!" gasped one of the trio.

Around a corner they darted, but left Bob Bragg stretched on a pile of ashes.

They had done swift, hard, brutal work, and left Bob Bragg for dead.

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

"Say, rouse up, can't ye?" demanded the soldier, prod-
ding our hero with the butt of his gun.

But Bob didn't stir.

"This'll go hard on me," growled the soldier. "This corner is a part of my post, and I've been warned to look out for fights and stop 'em. Why couldn't the kid go somewhere else to get mobbed?"

Dropping his gun, the sentry resorted to rubbing the boy's wrists.

Next he poured half a pint of water from his canteen through the boy's lips.

"Wake up! Change cars!" appealed the sentry, slapping the boy's palms smartly.

A small crowd gathered, of course.

In the midst of the excitement Bob opened his eyes.

"Of course you ain't dead," said the soldier, drily.

"Who said I was?" mumbled Bob.

"You looked like it for a while."

Then our hero remembered the fight in which he hadn't had a show to take a part.

Frantically he felt at his breast pocket.

Bank book and wallet were still there.

"What are you doing on Market street, anyway?" demanded the soldier.

"Trying to find my bank and get my money out," Bob stammered.

"What bank?"

"Excelsior."

"Next block above."

"I know it."

"Can you get there?"

"I think so."

"You want to be sure, if you're going to carry money," muttered the sentry.

"Soldier, I'll take the boy there safely, if you wish," interposed a mild-looking man, dressed in black and wearing a white tie.

"Minister, ain't you?" challenged the soldier.

"Yes," replied the clergyman, and gave his name.

"It'll be a kind action, then," replied the sentry, glad to have an assault case like our hero off his hands.

"Try to walk," urged the clergyman, bending down over our hero.

"Oh, I guess I can," murmured the boy.

He rose, supported by the clergyman.

"Going to get your money out to go home?" asked the clergyman, as they moved up the street.

"Are the trains moving east, sir?"

"Oh, yes, after a fashion," smiled the minister.

"No, I can't go home yet," Bob replied, shaking his head. "I've got work cut out for me yet."

"There's one of the sad sights of this desolate city," observed the clergyman, as they reached the next corner.

He pointed to a pile of ashes on which lay a man just as he had been killed.

"A prowler, shot while snooping in the Electric Bank ruins," went on the clergyman.

Bob started.

"Why, I gave the military warning of an attempt that would be made on the Electric," he cried.

"Did you?"

"Last night. It was some of the gang that attacked me a little while ago."

"Then suppose we see if this is another of the gang," suggested the clergyman, as they turned into the lot.

On the breast of the dead man the soldiers had pinned a simple placard:

"Looters, take warning!"

But Bob was not looking at the placard.

For an instant he stood as if dazed.

Then with a low cry, he sprang forward.

There was a bandage over the dead man's face.

Yet our hero was almost certain that he recognized the features.

To the minister's utter amazement, Bragg instantly snatched off the bandage.

There lay the man with the crescent-shaped scar on his face—shot dead while prowling in the ashes under the bank.

Bob, heedless of all else, was down on his knees, tearing open the man's coat.

Click! A soldier had shot back the bolt of his rifle, prepared to shoot the boy for a looter.

But just in time the sentry caught sight of the clergyman's cloth.

"Put up that gun, sentry," called the minister, sharply, "and come here."

Wonderingly, the soldier obeyed the reverend gentleman's order.

"Here it is!" quivered Bob Bragg, drawing his hand out of an inner pocket of the dead man's coat and flourishing aloft a paper.

"Tell me," he begged, passing the paper to the clergyman, "is this the marriage certificate of Richard Bragg and my mother?"

"It looks very like it," smiled the clergyman.

"Thank heaven!"

"Why, that's the chap mentioned in our orders from headquarters," cried the sentry. "No wonder we couldn't find a chap with a scar on his face when he had it bandaged!"

Scar-face was certainly dead—one of the scores of unknowns who perished justly before the muzzles of soldiers' rifles in those dread days.

In his pockets, as the sentry examined, were found many other looted articles, showing how busy the dead scoundrel had been while alive.

But he had been caught at last.

In time Scar-face undoubtedly would have gone East and tried to sell that certificate to the highest bidder.

As a distant cousin of Bob's father was contesting Mrs. Bragg's claim, that relative doubtless would have bought up the marriage certificate only to destroy it.

But Bob had it safe in his own hands now. He felt that it would never again be lost.

Some hours after he rushed excitedly up to the shelter tent that covered his friends.

"Lena! Nan!" he cried, breathlessly.

Then, as they came flocking out to him, Elsie and all, he told them all the glad news.

"It's me for the East, as quickly as I can start—to-night, if possible," glowed the boy.

"To-night?" demanded Lena and Nan together, disappointment showing plaintively.

"Oh, Uncle Bob—not as soon as that!" begged Elsie.

"Yes, to-night," quivered Bob. "And see here, girls—all of you! There isn't a ghost of a reason why you can't get away, too. Lena, you're a dressmaker. Nan, you're a milliner. Do you think money will be flowing fast in your lines here during the next few months? Every dollar will be needed in rebuilding the city. Come East with me!"

"East with you?" echoed Lena and Nan in the same breath.

"Yes, to-night. See here! By the time I reach the East with this precious paper the banks will let mother and my

self have all kinds of money. I never forget my friends, and mother always backs me up in that. I can pledge you that we'll set you up in the finest kind of shops in the East, if that would suit you."

Lena shook her head, but Nan actually looked wistful over the plan.

So, in the end, the young people carried their way.

That night the precious paper rested in General Funtson's safe at headquarters, for they found it necessary to delay their start until the day following.

But on the next day they all got safely away.

The night before the train steamed into the station at New York, Bob Bragg caught Nan standing on the platform of the car.

She was taking her first look at the real East.

"It's a glorious country to stay in, Nan," the boy glowed.

"So is California," she answered, simply. "One catastrophe doesn't kill a Californian's love for his state."

"Oh, I expect to see California again," Bob smiled. "I'm not scared out, by a long shot."

"This East of yours is so new to me," she murmured.

"But you're going to know a good deal more about the East," he laughed. "I'm going to teach you, Nan, you know; and some day we'll go back to the Golden Gate together."

"Together! What do you mean?" she demanded, coloring.

But Bob had caught her hand, and he held it tightly.

"If you don't know what I mean, Nan, you're clever enough to guess, anyway."

"I'd rather you'd explain."

"Nan, you've heard Elsie call me Uncle Bob?"

"Of course."

"It's in your power to make me the child's Uncle Bob in earnest."

Now Nan snatched away her hand quickly.

"That's what you mean?" she murmured.

"I mean to be Elsie's Uncle Bob!"

He uttered the words as decisively as if he had the power to settle it all.

Nan remaining silent, he bent forward to peer eagerly into her flushed face.

"Am I going to be Uncle Bob?" he asked, softly.

"Hadn't you better ask Elsie?"

"Oh, if it's up to Elsie to decide, then it's a cinch!" chuckled delighted Bob. "So that's the answer—you leave it all to Elsie?" he insisted, joyously.

"Since you seem to like cinches—yes. Ask Elsie."

"I'll do it now," Bob declared.

He held Nan's hand tightly as he led her back into the car.

"Elsie," he demanded, brusquely, as he bent over the child at her mother's side, "how'd you like me to be your really, truly Uncle Bob?"

"But how can you be?" asked the child, puzzled.

"Nan will help me out in that if you want me to be your real uncle."

Elsie's answer was of the right kind. She held up her face to be kissed.

"Lena," asked the boy, a little later, as he rested one arm around the shoulders of Elsie's mother, "do you know I've had a queer notion that I wished you were nearer my age, so that I could marry you. Now, I understand. You were just my style of girl—you're so much like Nan."

"I'm glad you found her, then," laughed Lena. "If you hadn't, you might have been impulsive enough to propose to me. And I'm afraid you'd seem like a boy husband for me. But you're right—Nan is just the girl for you."

"The only one in the world—for me," Bob declared, happily, smiling across at his sweetheart.

"But what on earth is your mother going to say?" Lena asked.

"Wait until you've seen my mother."

"Is she dangerous?" Nan asked.

"She thinks, as most mothers do, I suppose, that the world was created for my enjoyment."

"Then she'll never believe I'm a tenth part good enough for you," Nan answered, tremulously.

"Oh, yes she will," laughed Bob. "For that's another one of mother's peculiarities—she thinks I know a heap. She'll take my word for what I think about you, Nan. Did she hesitate an instant about wiring the money for me to bring you East?"

Mrs. Bragg proved to be quite as good as Bob's word.

She embraced Nan at once, and Lena and Elsie immediately after.

Bob and his mother came into that fortune easily, on presentation of the proof that our hero had obtained at such risk to his own life.

Still, Bob is no idler. He has started in business.

This fall he is going to become Uncle Bob in reality. And Lena and Elsie will live with them.

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